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BANG! goes PS3





Bang! It's the noise you get from an explosion, which is a phenomenon you get from a sudden release of energy. And, nearly two years after the debut of PS3, that's just what this month's cover game is.

In the course of those two years, Sony has struggled to send out a compelling message about its new console. Its vision, repeated over and over, is 'this isn't just the new PS2'. But that's produced two problems. The first is that a new PS2 is exactly what the bulk of Sony's enormous customer base wants. And the second is that, so far, there's been next to no evidence with which to support the claim. In private it may have been a different matter, but in public the emphasis on projects like *Gran Turismo HD* or even the excellent *MotorStorm* (reviewed on p74) has done nothing to explain Sony's vehement assertions that this machine is a revolution in waiting.

And then, bang! The Media Molecule game – still untitled at the time of going to press – comes along. How about that? At a time when there's so much concern about gaming being driven by conservative sequels, here's a project that doesn't just not have a number after its name, it doesn't even have a name, despite being days away from its GDC debut. And, as you'll see on p56, this anarchic project embodies in one floppy body and two button eyes everything Sony has failed to convey in its press releases: that PS3 can change the nature of gaming, that 'playing' doesn't necessarily mean what we think it does, that it's worth selling everyone a hard drive and full online access, that the barriers between gaming and other media are wearing away, and that the company's single greatest strength is in its range of software, and in its willingness to personally back risky, avant-garde projects. None of which, of course, explains just what that floppy body is going to get up to. And with good reason: for the first time in gaming history, that really is entirely up to you.



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"There is no conspiracy. Nobody is in charge. It's a headless blunder operating under the illusion of a master plan"







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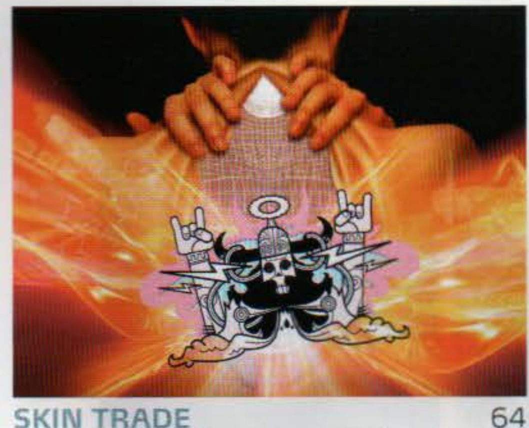
APRIL

This month











Every month





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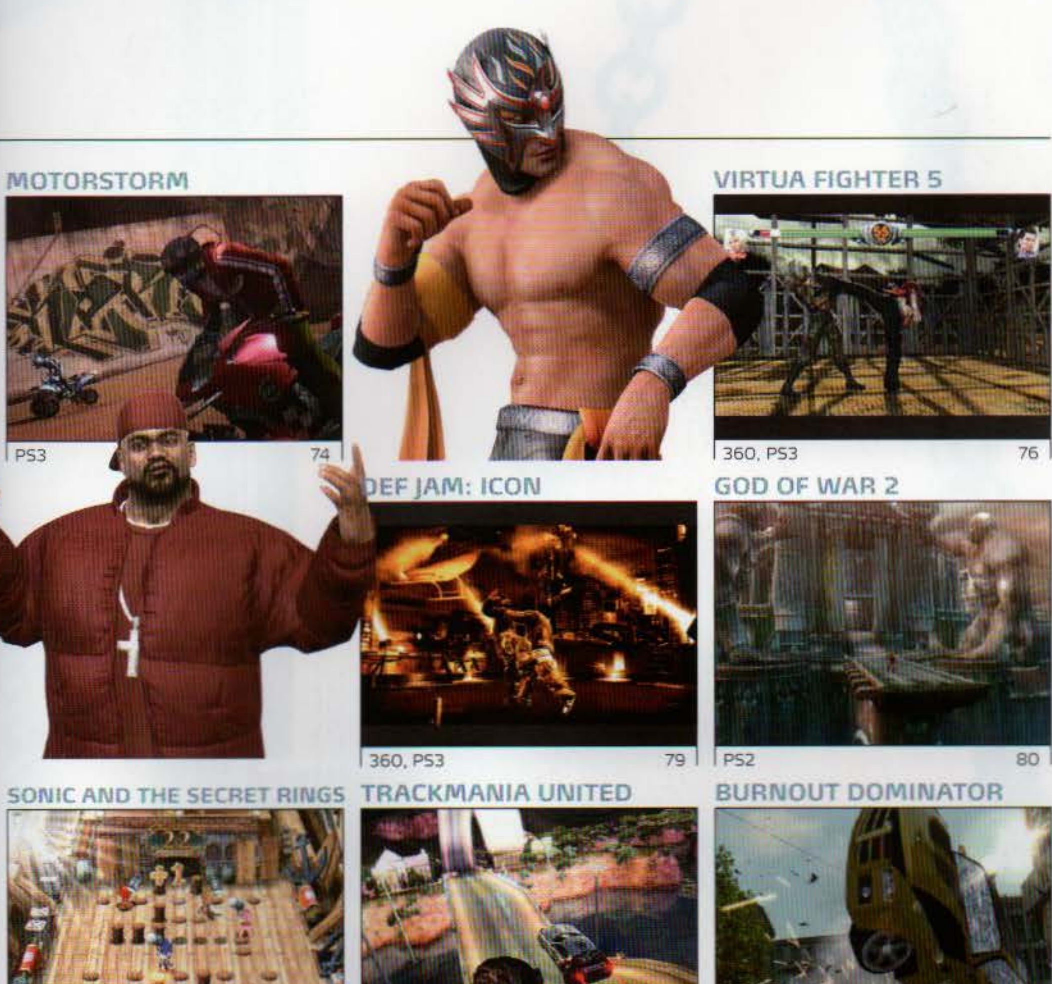
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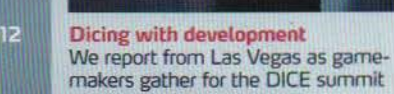











Wii

INDUSTRY

Launch attacks

It's bullets over broadband as the console wars get underway, but who's really scoring the hits?

For those who'd forgotten what a games industry cockfight was, or who were out of the loop when Sega, speaking of the SNES, declared that 'the others just don't stack up', the last few months have seen more than their share of post-launch tension. The spat between Sony and Nintendo, a highlight of which has been SCEA spokesman **Dave Karraker**'s remark: "Wii could be considered an impulse buy," has put paid to suggestions that the consoles could peacefully co-exist on the shelves.

This has been the most scrutinised launch period in gaming history, and there are few commentators who've not slipped the word 'rivals' into their coverage

A glance at the figures doesn't suggest a battle that Sony would want to highlight: sales of Wii have been trouncing those of PlayStation 3 since before Christmas, the ratio standing at almost 2:1 (919,643 to 457,558) at the end of December in Japan, with US figures for January following suit. But neither company has a great deal of choice. This has been the most scrutinised launch period in gaming history, if not necessarily the most fiercely fought, and there are few commentators who've passed on the opportunity to slip the word 'rivals' into their coverage.





Top: a debut atop the Japanese all-format charts promised great things of *Virtua Fighter 5*, which then sank out of the top 20 in the space of a fortnight. Above: *Killzone 2* still remains Sony's likeliest future hit, not that the series' reputation suggests it

But while the thirst for cheap scandal has played its part, there are also genuine concerns over the honesty of the two campaigns and even the validity of the numbers traditionally taken as gospel truth. Retail monitor NPD, for example, only accounts for approximately 60 per cent of stores in the US, firing debate over apparent discrepancies between the numbers of consoles shipped to retail



The impact of *MotorStorm*'s arrival was dampened somewhat by its staggered release and multiple versions, but it remains the jewel in PS3's crown. Sony has touted several thirdparty exclusives for the coming months, though few have kept that status for particularly long



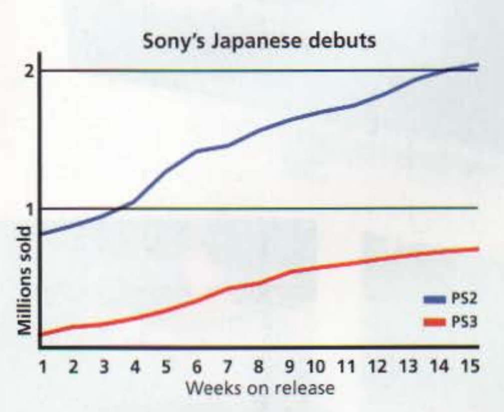
PS3 UK launch line-up

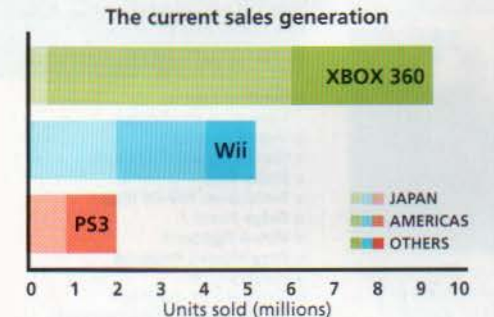
A mixture of exclusives, downloads and belated ports

- Formula One – Championship Edition
- Virtua Tennis 3
- Genji: Days Of The Blade
- MotorStorm
- Resistance: Fall Of Man
- Ridge Racer 7
- Virtua Fighter 5
- Tony Hawk's Project 8
- Def Jam: Icon
- Sonic The Hedgehog
- The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
- Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom
- Marvel Ultimate Alliance
- Enchanted Arms
- Need For Speed Carbon
- Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2007
- The Godfather: The Dons Edition
- NBA 2K7
- NHL 2K7
- FEAR: First Encounter Assault And Recon
- Blazing Angels
- Full Auto 2: Battlelines
- Call Of Duty 3
- Splinter Cell: Double Agent
- Mobile Suit Gundam: Target In Sight
- World Snooker Championship 2007
- Fight Night Round 3
- NBA Street Home Court

DOWNLOAD TITLES:

- Tekken: Dark Resurrection
- Lemmings
- Go! Sudoku
- Go! Puzzle
- Blast Factor
- Flow
- Super Rub'a'Dub
- GripShift





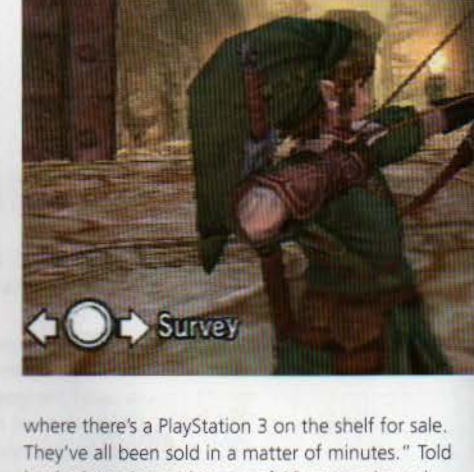
Top: the difference between sales of PS2 and PS3 aren't so easy to explain in Japan, where Sony's latest machine received a hefty price cut before it was even launched. The apparent levelling out of its sales curve, however, will be the company's larger long-term concern

(usually the suggestion of the platform holders) and the numbers sold on to the consumer. Analysts were quick to pounce on two particular figures: Nintendo's boast of 2 million units shipped prior to the end of 2006, and NPD's report of only 1.1 million units sold. With the machine still experiencing widespread stock shortages, the question was immediately one of 'where are the missing Wiis?' which cynics then interpreted as 'who's telling the truth?'

Asked for comment, a Nintendo spokesman insisted: "We're always very clear on our shipping and sales figures, and we did ship 3.19 million Wiis globally. We initially said 4 million back at E3, which was admittedly slightly higher, but we only announce our actual shipping figures when the units arrive in their destination markets – we try to be as transparent as possible. So when those questions arose, while the units had left the factory in Japan, they hadn't arrived at the markets. That accounts for the 800,000."

In an apparent case of severe foot-in-mouth disease, meanwhile, SCEA president **Jack Tretton** chose to answer his company's critics, which included his opposite number at Nintendo, Reggie Fils-Aime, by addressing the evident stock *surplus* of the PS3. And this, incredibly, is how he chose to do it:

"If you can find a PS3 anywhere in North America that's been on shelves for more than five minutes," he told US publication EGM, "I'll give you 1,200 bucks for it. I can get any retail buyer on the phone with you and get them to verify that there's not a single retail location in America where there's a PlayStation 3 on the shelf for sale. They've all been sold in a matter of minutes." Told by the interviewer that out of 18 stores phoned, half had anything up to 20 machines in stock, Tretton quickly changed tack. "If only nine of the 18 stores you contacted had supplies, that seems to be a clear indication that sales continue to be outstanding."



Given that popular inventory tracker itrackr.com was then reporting a plentiful supply of PS3s on US shelves, with consumers quick to provide anecdotal support, Tretton's remarks were instantly received as either insular corporate naïvety at its worst or a bare-faced lie, and were embarassing in either case. With further incongruity emerging in the company's Blu-ray figures – if both NPD's figures for Blu-ray disc sales and Sony's for Blu-ray player adoption are to be believed, then only one in four player owners have actually bought movies – the real status of Sony's consumer electronics division, which accounts for two thirds of its revenue overall, has seldom felt so uncertain.

All it takes is the one great game, of course, to turn that situation around. But for both PS3 and Wii there are conspicuous gaps in both the long- and short-term portfolios. For Nintendo, that question of novelty value will be hanging over Wii until *Mario Galaxy*, *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* or another unannounced title can assert its credentials as a 'proper' videogame. And novelty titles aside, the post-launch charts in all regions make for





***Mario Galaxy* and *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* are big hopes for Wii's traditional gaming audience, the latter described by Reggie Fils-Aime as a game to crush any lingering doubts as to the Wii Remote's FPS control capabilities. Mario, however, has yet to see a release date**





The three top-selling Wii games around the world: *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, *Wii Play* and *Wii Sports*. *Wii Play* made the podium on the strength of its Japanese sales alone, the US version delayed for over two months. Throughout February, however, it topped the charts both in the US and the UK, coming second in Japan



sobering reading. In Japan, the mid-February period saw just two Wii games – predictably *Wii Sports* and *Wii Play* – linger in the top ten at positions eight and nine. Next was *WarioWare Smooth Moves* down at 36, beneath a raft of DS and PS2 titles, and PS3's *Virtua Fighter 5*, which already languished at 25 just a fortnight after release. For the same period in the UK, meanwhile, which had still to see the release of PS3, *Excite Truck* was the most popular Wii title at 21.

Of a global install base of 5.2 million Wiis, how many are owned by people who expect little more than *Wii Sports 2* or similar?

How many AAA genre titles Nintendo, with its enigmatic casual marketing strategy, actually needs should become clearer when its next wave of party games arrives. Of a global install base of 5.2 million Wiis, how many are owned by people who expect little more than *Wii Sports 2* or similar? With rumours circulating of trouble in the company's Independent Developer Programme due to devkit shortages, how likely is a substantial alternative that isn't a lacklustre port? At present, the most likely source seems to be EA, even if titles such as *SSX Blur* and *My Sims* are still products of pre-existing IP and technology. At last month's DICE summit, Fils-Aime attributed two thirds of Wii's worldwide software sales to thirdparty support, though for players of *Far Cry Vengeance*, *Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam* and *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* that might not be so uplifting.

PS3 is similarly short on announced thirdparty exclusives – a worry considering Microsoft's willingness to spend big on titles such as *Splinter Cell: Conviction* – but by far the bigger issue for Sony is a turnaround in profitability for the machine itself. Perhaps the first evidence of a streamlining move to directly affect consumers was the announcement in February of reduced backwards compatibility support for upcoming European machines. With dedicated hardware support swapped for a cost-cutting software solution, the initial number of PS2 games playable on Euro PS3s will be substantially lower than for the US models.

But while the announcement drew flak from a vocal minority, it's a shrewd gambit given the overall circumstances. SCEE president David Reeves played down the importance of backwards compatibility for gamers, predictably choosing to reinforce the company's focus on current generation titles and assuring those affected that downloadable firmware updates, much like those of PSP and Xbox 360, will continue to extend support to an increasing range of PS2 titles. How greatly this will affect any sustainable recovery for PS3's fortunes, however, has yet to be seen.

In a sense, one of the toughest opponents Sony has to face over the next few months is itself, the sales of PS3 causing no immediate alarm when compared to those of Xbox 360's launch, but running substantially lower than those of PS2. While the stock shortage issues associated with Blu-ray laser production go some way to explaining that gap, which stands at almost 1.5 million units after 16 weeks on sale in Japan, sustained growth in the mid-term is far from guaranteed. Sales figures in the US compare more favourably, the gap after three months merely 300,000. But PS2 performance crucially held steady for the subsequent months, leading to a second Christmas rush that saw sales jump by almost 300 per cent. Does PS3 have the games and momentum to do the same? Again, only time will tell.



The absence of either *MotorStorm* or a title with mass Japanese appeal allowed Sony's *Resistance: Fall Of Man* to claim the title of most successful PS3 launch title. The success of *Fight Night: Round 3*, however, which celebrated its first birthday last month on 360, says much about the appeal of PS3's first wave of exclusives. Activision's *Call Of Duty 3* was another top seller, and considerably more current given its November release date

EVENT

Devs head to Vegas for a roll of the DICE

Top designers, developers and business leaders get together to discuss the state of the industry, its trends and the future

The Green Valley Ranch Resort, minutes away from the Las Vegas strip, saw the seventh annual DICE (Design Innovate Communicate Entertain) summit take place from February 6 to 9. But it wasn't all poker and strippers, there was serious videogaming discussion to be had as well.

A very different show from the Game Developer's Conference that follows in March, DICE attracts the upper echelons of both business and creative people to discuss things in a relaxed setting. Because fewer than 600 people attend each year, there's a strong feeling of camaraderie – and while attendees teed off with a morning golf tournament, the content didn't begin until the evening keynote.



Giving the summit's opening address, was president of Sony Pictures Digital, Yair Landau. He observed that games haven't quite reached the point of fully telling stories, but noted that people working in one medium will be able to extend into another as their skills will easily translate.

The next morning began with an emotional speech by outgoing president of the Electronic Software Association Doug Lowenstein. His final address to the industry he served for 12 years began with a retrospective look back, and ended with some thoughts for the future. He recalled experiences on Capital Hill during the first United States Senate hearing on videogame violence, a catalysing event that led to the rise of an industry trade association. In 1994, he founded the Interactive Digital Software Association and in 2003 the association was renamed as the ESA.

Lowenstein also spoke about the E3 trade show, which he claimed help put the industry on the map, saying that without a central event, the industry would never have drawn mass media. He also spoke of the importance of First Amendment rights and the American ratings board (calling the ESRB the industry's shield), as well as the fight against piracy.

"There is nothing more important than defending the first amendment," he said. "It is a

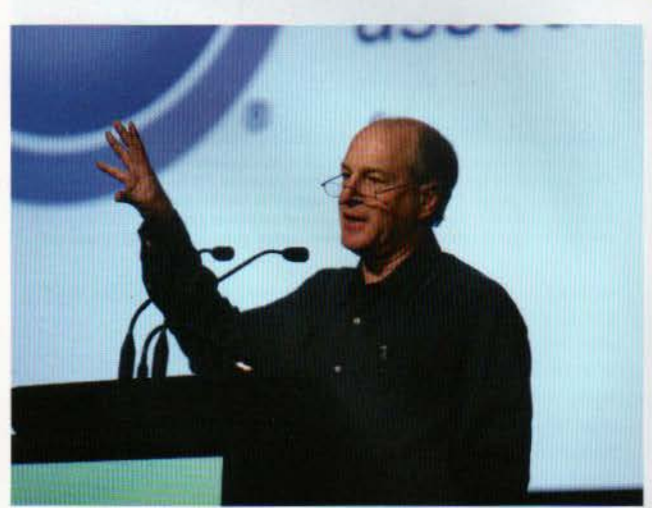


OUT THERE

WII MUSKETEERS

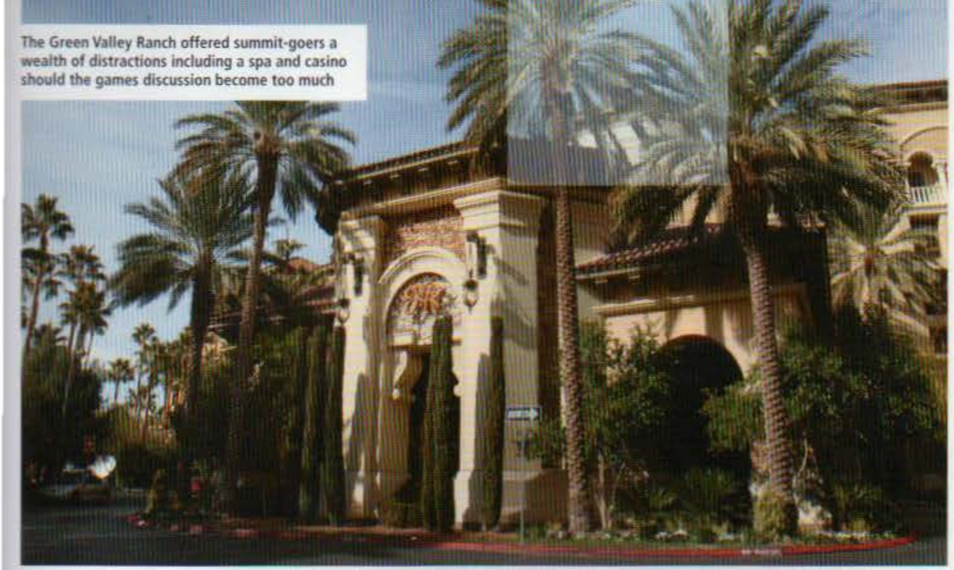
The Wii Remote: if international media sources are to be believed, Nintendo's new controller may be the most lethal device man has created since the H-bomb. Injury lawyers will be delighted to know that the team from USMechatronics have been doing their best to make the Remote even deadlier, by using it to control a KR16 industrial robot. An impressive technical achievement, shaky video footage reveals what looks disturbingly like sandbags propped around the base of the machinery, which suggests that the Wiibot could be fatal even without the optional sword or tennis racquet attachment. Whether it makes it to a tribunal or not, the results seem likely to prove the adage that a Wiibot may wobble, but if it falls over it will presumably kill you.

http://www.usmechatronics.com/usmgarage/wiibot.html



If the ESA's outgoing president Doug Lowenstein intended his speech at the summit to go with a bang, he managed it, with an impassioned defence of developers' artistic freedom and his association's role in ensuring that this US constitutional right is not trampled on




The Green Valley Ranch offered summit-goers a wealth of distractions including a spa and casino should the games discussion become too much

fight worth fighting, it's a fight I'm proud to fight, and we need to keep fighting. But in my view there has been nothing more important that the ESA has done than putting its money and resources out there to defend your artistic freedom. And sometimes that's not easy. Plenty of things are put out that are art, that don't necessarily ennoble the culture, but they're protected. We made a decision at the ESA that we're going to defend constitutional freedoms no matter what. And I think we've done that, and we'll continue to do that."

But the best material was saved for last as Lowenstein listed his pet peeves. His first salvo was directed towards the chorus of industry insiders who expect this industry to grow and prosper, but are not willing to put the time and effort into helping it do so. The people with the most at stake, he noted, are apparently too lazy. He closed with a broadside at the gaming press, explaining that it needs a higher level of maturity, and a need to take itself seriously: "The game industry press has the ability to push this industry to greater heights and greater success."

When the day was done, it was time for the Interactive Achievement Awards, held on the Las Vegas strip at the Hard Rock Casino. The awards,



which are voted on by the Academy of Interactive Arts and Science's 9,000 members, are held yearly in conjunction with the DICE Summit.

A Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to former Nintendo of America executives Minoru Arakawa and Howard Lincoln, for significant contributions in guiding the industry to the prominent position it holds today. Presenting the award on stage was Larry Probst, chairman of Electronic Arts. "Not so long ago," he said, "The future of the industry wasn't certain." After the crash of the games market in America, Arakawa and Lincoln introduced the NES, the Game Boy, the N64 and eventually the GameCube.

Lowenstein's first salvo was directed towards the industry insiders who expect this industry to grow and prosper, but are not willing to put the time and effort into helping it do so

"And let's not forget Virtual Boy," Probst said, drawing cheers from the crowds.

"The impact of the work done by Minoru Arakawa and Howard Lincoln can still be felt today," said Joseph Olin, president of AIAS (the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences). "The creation of the licensed publishing model, quality approval for third-party games and peripherals, and the fostering of innovative sales and marketing programs, played a significant part of Nintendo's success then, and are at the foundation of the consumer interactive entertainment business."

When asked if he'd played the Wii yet, Arakawa's face lit up. "Yes," he said. "I have

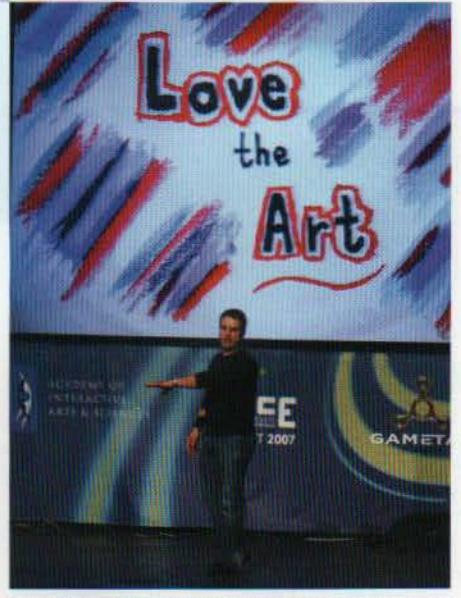

Epic's Cliffy B was celebrating taking eight awards at the AIAS awards, including outstanding achievement in art direction for *Gears*' 'destroyed beauty'



The Spore team

Will Wright introduces his team and defines their roles

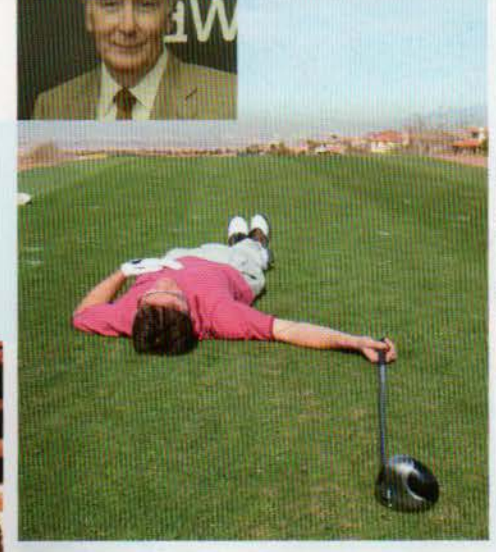
I am not alone in the world: Will Wright introduced key members of the Spore team on stage, as each demonstrated particular elements of their anticipated game. "My role as lead designer is really more traffic cop than anything else," conceded Wright, who says his realisation of the project's sheer scale led him to delegate. As a classic Wright touch, each member of the team has a nickname describing their role. The crack designers are reputed to hate the nicknames, but the detailed demonstration only proves they're in the right roles. Wright jokingly describes the game, "You can basically have an interstellar war between the Care-Bears and the Klingons." Above, from left to right: Alex Hutchinson is known as the Cowboy; Jenna Chalmers as the Mastermind; Ocean Quigley as the Scientist; Chaim Gingold as the Toymaker; and Will Wright the Traffic Cop.



Gas Powered Games' Chris Taylor made a highly personal speech looking back over his 19-year career in videogames, from initial inspiration in a games shop to making *Supreme Commander*

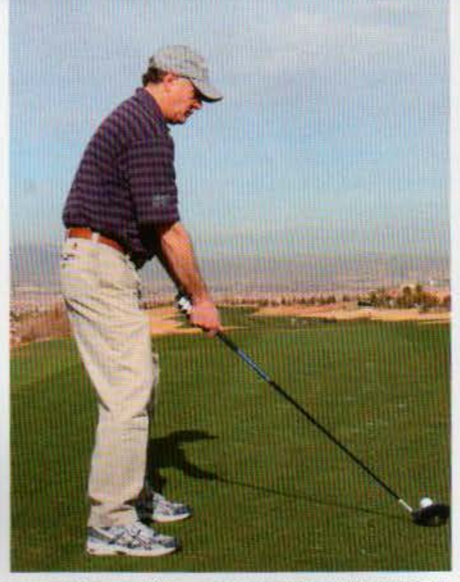












The summit's leisurely first day began with a golf tournament at the Rio Secca ggolf club, sponsored appropriately enough by Electronic Arts, who provided 'power-up' bonus games along the way. Although Tiger Woods didn't make it, a number of game industry golfers showed up, including Microsoft's Kim Shane, Louis Castle (*Command And Conquer*), Don Daglow (*Neverwinter Nights*), and Ted Price (*Ratchet & Clank*)

one in my home and one in my office, and I am playing almost every day." Before the Wii came along, he admitted, he had almost given up playing videogames. "Because it's very complicated. But Wii makes me back to play again. It's very easy to do."

But the rest of the night overwhelmingly belonged to *Gears Of War*, which took a huge eight awards out of ten nominations, including console game of the year and overall game of the year, in which it was up against *Oblivion*, *Twilight Princess*, *Wii Sports* and *Guitar Hero II*.

The night overwhelmingly belonged to Gears Of War, which took a huge eight awards out of ten nominations, including console game of the year and overall game of the year

Epic president Michael Capps appeared absolutely stunned: "These are our peers. When game developers, game designers say we've done well… having our peers say it's the best game of the year? That's insane." And for designer Cliff Bleszinski, it never gets old. After countless acceptances on the stage, he told the audience, "I realised I forgot to thank my mom, so thank you, Mom."

The morning after, Gas Powered Games' Chris Taylor gave an inspirational talk to a still bleary audience. In a stylistic combination of stand-up comic and new-age motivational speaker, Taylor delivered insights from his 19 years developing games. He told the story of breaking down in tears during a meeting in December, when Taylor was telling a colleague how he felt about this business. "I broke down. Because this business is that challenging. And it can do that do you," Taylor said, adding that he is normally equipped for such things.

Taylor started the process of changing how he worked and lived, putting his family and health first. Initially ashamed because he was afraid the publishers might object, but soon learned that people at publishers have families, too. "This is the secret that's getting out: we're growing up." In the process, he happened across a level of sophistication he hadn't anticipated. "Creative people don't stop creating once they leave the office. They keep solving problems when they go home."

Taylor exhorted the audience: "Let's get back to the love for the art. Let's love our customers, let's

Newswire



Live elsewhere

Another of last month's unexpected departures saw Greg Canessa, the man who pioneered Microsoft's Xbox Live Arcade, quit both the service and the company to join casual game developer PopCap as vice president of videogame platforms. If the move came as a surprise, however, the destination did not: Canessa's relationship with PopCap saw the distribution of six of its games via XBLA. Microsoft Casual Games group manager Bryan Trussel replaces him at Redmond. The announcement came shortly before that of Microsoft's latest big-name recruitment, with ex-EA executive Don Mattrick joining the company's PC and Xbox game divisions in "an advisory role."





love our families, let's love ourselves." If you don't love the thing you're making, he cautioned, nobody else will.

On the third day, Harmonix Music Systems' CEO told the story of *Guitar Hero*'s runaway success, and how most people think they're living the dream. Alex Rigopulos started by showing a slide of the company's profits over the last 12 years, which were mostly negative until 2006. But along the way, there were moments of small victory. "I feel like we've been living this dream for 12 years now," he said.

And in the last five minutes of his speech, Rigopulos captured all of the spirit and power of game development. We're in control of these games that we're crafting, he said, but in real life there's also always a next level. "There's a kind of never-ending cycle of pursuit. Lasting fulfilment – it never comes from any one success or one achievement, but rather from this ongoing sense of forward motion," Rigopulos stated. He spoke of feeling the familiar anxiousness and urgency, self-doubt and stress, and everything else that has always been prevalent during the company's history.

Rigopulos thinks it's key to constantly recognise that this all flows from something profoundly positive, namely is the very great degree to which developers genuinely care about the games that



One of the key elements of DICE's smaller size, and relaxed setting, is the networking opportunities it presents. As is so often the case at gaming events, these tend to be as much about having a good time and getting to meet life-long heroes as they are about bending a potential business associate's ear about a project, or desperately pitching your ground-breaking game idea

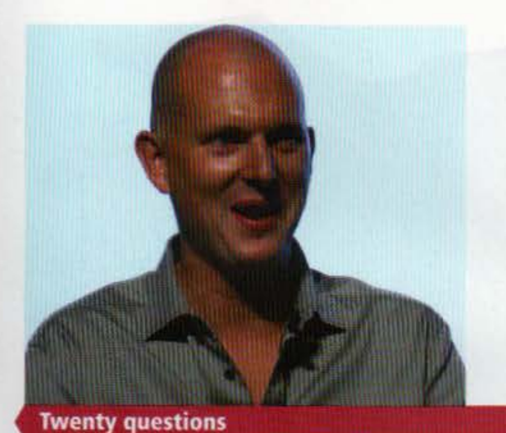
they're creating. He concluded: "There are few blessings in life that are quite so great as to be able to spend one's days labouring creatively in the service of something that one genuinely loves. And this, I think, is the dream that all game creators are living all the time."

With the close of the conference, attendees scattered to the four winds. In the lobby, one attendee offered a piece of advice that both served as a warning and an impetus. "Don't let the suits get in the way of your love for games."





Everyone who attended the summit was invited to the Texas hold 'em poker tournament: a meeting, networking and fleecing opportunity with a $200 buy in. With prizes for the top ten players, the overall winner wasn't a game publisher or developer, but a DICE staff member



Twenty questions

Phil Harrison defends the PS3 launch on stage

Newsweek's resident gamer N'Gai Croal took the stage with Sony's president of Worldwide Studios Phil Harrison to ask the tough questions. An interview in which Valve's Gabe Newell had called the PS3 launch a total disaster was brought up. Harrison responded by asking, "By what measure is the launch of PS3 unsuccessful? We had people lined up in stores in three continents." Citing the fact that more PS3s have been shipped to Asia and North America than during the launch of either previous consoles, Harrison pondered the sheer negativity, adding that the European launch is on track with units currently en route from China. Moving on to lighter topics, Harrison also took the opportunity to show off his latest title, *Super Rub-A-Dub*, a new downloadable PS3 game that uses the Sixaxis controller (see p30).



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Although their in-game use may still be fairly limited, Nintendo's Miis remain, for the time being, the best reason to turn on the Wii everyday. Mii fansites are already cropping up all over the internet, like a very endearing strain of measles, and Showmii is one of the best yet at capturing the uncomplicated, quirky charm of Nintendo's own interface. Essentially nothing more than a submissions-based gallery of celebrity Miis, the site's appeal lies in the fact that, like hip-hop lyrics, even when the entries aren't good, they're still hilarious. Our award for technical excellence goes to the Spike Lee and Chuck Norris efforts, which are both almost uncanny. The award for the most entertaining failure, however, is for Han Solo, who looks more like Barry Scott from the Cillit Bang adverts.

Site:
Show Mii
URL:
www.showmii.com



Ybarra's credits include the original *Madden NFL*, *The Bard's Tale* and *MULE*

INTERVIEW

Universal traveller

Where do you go after Apple, EA and The Matrix Online? To the stars, of course



Cheyenne Mountain Entertainment is made up of a group of professionals assembled for one purpose: to create a *Stargate* videogame where others have failed. Product development VP, EA co-founder and *Matrix Online* producer **Joe Ybarra** leads us through the door.

How well do you think EA has stuck to its mandates of building quality brands and supporting independent artists?

It's had the most success with branding; supporting independent artists is a more complex subject.

"We're failing when it comes to mechanics. We keep rehashing the same old fantasy roleplaying ideas. And our definition of what constitutes a persistent world is getting a little mushy"

There are times when it's in the business' interest to work with third parties and times when it's best to do all the work in-house. There are also times when the best course of action is to acquire developers. Part of what has made EA so successful is recognising when working with independents makes sense.

Why did *The Matrix Online* fail?

The core reason is that it wasn't as fun as it needed to be. The Wachowski brothers had a vision about the way the game should look that limited our palette. Basically, they didn't want us to use any blue and very little red; what we ended up with was a green, desolate landscape that is hard to look at for 200 hours. The combat system was repetitive and everyone in the Matrix was essentially human. The game needed more options in gameplay styles and enemy types to be more successful.

What rewards and responsibilities does a role have to offer to catch your eye? Is it safe to suggest that your position at Cheyenne Mountain met these criteria?

When I was offered this job, Cheyenne Mountain Entertainment was building a business and an MMO from scratch. That's a very attractive combination. CME also has top-notch management and a great investment team that make it easier for me to do my job well – the kind of team you really want to be a part of.

An obvious question: why Stargate?

First of all, it's got this great structure for the exploration of new worlds and that's an element of MMORPGs that hasn't been developed as much as it could be. Stargate literally opens up the universe



Cheyenne Mountain's pedigree should ensure a smoother ride for *Stargate Worlds* than met JoWood's ill-fated *SG1* project, developed by Perception

Newswire



EA swaps heads

In what's being described by market analysts as a timely succession, current EA chairman Larry Probst announced this month his surprise intention to step down from the role. His replacement, somewhat remarkably, is the very man he took over from in April 2004, former EA president John Riccitiello.

Having departed originally to create the private equity firm Elevation Partners, which recently lost out to Britain's SCi in its bid to acquire Eidos, Riccitiello rejoins following the announcement of record EA earnings over the Christmas quarter of $1.281 billion (£650 million). Elevation's first investment created the Bioware/Pandemic partnership, though whether this has any connection to EA's recent decision to publish the super-developer's *Mercenaries 2: World In Flames* is unknown. Probst, meanwhile, will continue at EA in the role of executive chairman of the board of directors.



How many of Stargate's 17 million television viewers will be seduced by the prospect of an MMO is for *Stargate Worlds* to discover, though intuitive combat, bot support and ease of travel should help its cause

to the players. They take care of the problem of dramatic compression in MMORPGs because players don't have to slog across country to get to their goal. There's also the challenge of creating a combat system that recreates the squad-based combat seen in the show. Concepts like manoeuvre, cover and suppression have to be incorporated to properly reflect it.

It seems far too early in the genre's life to suggest that *World Of WarCraft* is the pinnacle of the MMO. What comes next, and where do you see things going in the distant future?

When the idea of virtual reality was invented, it was hardware-based. It was all about implants and goggles, but nobody was talking about the content. MMOs will be the content. I think we're moving towards holodeck technology like we saw in Star Trek: The Next Generation. There's a long way to go before that can happen. Just think about the software and AI that has to exist that can model just one of the period pieces the holodeck could generate. I think that's where the industry is moving over the extremely long term.

Is there a deficiency of fresh thinking in the MMO space?

If you look at things like Finland's *Habbo Hotel* and Korea's *Kart Rider*, there are some truly original ideas out there. The real problem is convincing someone to fund them.

But we're failing when it comes to mechanics. We keep rehashing the same old fantasy roleplaying ideas. And our definition of what constitutes a persistent world is getting a little mushy. Is online poker a persistent world MMO? It keeps track of my money and my skill level. The barrier to entry is practically zero. We've got to be willing to look at other genres and gameplay styles if we ever hope to be a mainstream product.

Do you think that it's realistic to suggest that games such as *Stargate Worlds* can cross over to the likes of Xbox 360? Or are there too many constraints?

Absolutely, it's realistic. There's nothing complicated about this. Console players will play games for hours like PC gamers. I'm not sure the attention span issue hasn't been overblown, but I do believe that console gamers aren't as tolerant of dead time in a game when compared to PC gamers.

Consoles force developers to build inside a set of constraints. Consoles have limited memory and hardware. There's a definite hard edge to a console. Developing for the PC feels unlimited in comparison. Consoles are unforgiving, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. It forces us to think more economically.

OUT THERE

ONLINE FRIENDS

The idea behind the 360Friendspot website is endearingly simple: the secret to a lasting friendship may be no more complex than figuring out whether you've both played *Blazing Angels* or not. The site works by taking your gamertag and comparing its details to a database to suggest possible matches. It's a nice concept, and if the 360 userbase wasn't in the thrall of a strange migratory groupthink making them flock from one hit to the next, the results might prove useful. Regardless of the fact that the match-up software often churns out some rather odd results, it's nice to see the community catering for those who find the 100-person limit of the Friends List daunting rather than restrictive.

• www.360friendspot.com

SOUND BYTES

"Yes. I'm so disappointed knowing exactly what the Wii can do – and I still think nobody knows it better than we – no pun intended [laughs]. They all have finally figured out, five years into the hardware's life cycle, how to do at least basic shaders and a rim light, but that's what everybody does. I still don't see enough post effects, although you would have insane fill-rates with Wii. I was digging out *Rebel Strike* the other day and we had some people who were visiting ask: 'Why isn't anybody else doing this on Wii?' And I am at a loss. I really am."
Factor 5's Julian Eggebrecht talks to IGN.com about 'sloppy' Wii development

"I did get into it with one of my cellies. He got pissed because I sleep naked and I said: "It's not my fault it gives you a boner." He jumped up in my face, but I backed down."
Convicted Xbox modder Jason Jones describes life in a Federal halfway house to Laist.com

"Rather than concentrate on PS2 backwards compatibility, in the future, company resources will be increasingly focused on developing new games and entertainment features exclusively for PS3, truly taking advantage of this exciting technology."
SCEE president David Reeves on the decision to remove hardware PS2 compatibility from the European PS3

"Since the day I saw Iwata-san pull the Nunchuck controller out a few years ago at TGS, I've always realised that was the right thing for Nintendo to have to do for what they needed to do to be successful in this next generation. And it was always going to be a challenge for us. So, we have plans. This does not come as a surprise. Our strategy has been laid out for us years in advance, and you're going to see some of that this next holiday and beyond."
Is Peter Moore really hinting at a Microsoft motion-sensitive controller in a Game Informer interview?



INTERVIEW

Witcher craft

It's a long way from page to PC screen, but does being a Polish independent make the journey easier or harder?

The *Witcher*, first featured in **E**155, is an ambitious PC RPG based on the adventures of the albino mutant Geralt by the popular Polish low fantasy author, Andrzej Sapkowski. We visited the Warsaw offices of developer CD Projekt for a hands-on with the all-Polish production (see page 32) and a chance to discuss the challenges of novel-to-game adaptation with lead designer **Michal Madej**.

Is there a healthy development community in Poland? Do you communicate with the other teams?

For us, every success other Polish developers have is quite good, because it builds the reality that Poland has specialists that can make good games. For example we are very happy with *Painkiller* [developed by Warsaw's People Can Fly] being so successful. And also we try to support each other somehow because nobody else is training specialists in Poland, and we know that we have to train them by ourselves. As we are so few companies we try to co-operate in many things. There's no reason to have a competition.

With *The Witcher*, did you purposefully choose to work with something taken from Polish culture?

Everywhere Sapkowski is published, he's popular, not just in Poland. It's a basic misunderstanding that a Polish writer will write something that's completely Polish literature. Actually he writes something that's very international. I even think lots of his ideas are even more appealing for English-speaking people, because he's often abusing the myth of King Arthur. Most people in Poland don't understand names like Fisher King.

It's unusual for a studio to have the freedom you've had, funding the game yourselves – has that changed how it's turned out?

For sure. A Polish writer said: "You always have to listen to what people say, but you don't have to do what they want." It's the same with us. We're always listening to what publishers, journalists and fans are saying about our game, but then we do it our way. If we listened to everyone else we wouldn't have our charismatic hero, because they were saying people would want to play a male, female, elf, dwarf... But then there are a lot of things that are changed after hearing some very true, sometimes painful, opinions. I think





Playing outdoors

ARGs have even the DS beat when it comes to gaming outside of the living room – but you'll need to bring your own shovel

Perplex City is that rarity in a puzzle game – one that ends with the winner alone in the woods with a spade. A blend of interactive fiction playing out across websites, TV and puzzle cards, Mind Candy's title isn't the first alternate reality game (ARG), but one of the longest-running and most popular. And its winner, **Andy Darley**, seems likely to become a minor internet celebrity.

Readers of Darley's website (andthenhesaid.com/cube) will be familiar with his quest to locate the game's buried treasure, the Receda cube, which was finally unearthed in Wakerley Great Wood, Northamptonshire, in early February. Although the £100,000 reward is helping Darley to buy a house, it wasn't his primary reason for playing: "I found the immersive and interactive aspects exciting. It has so many strands – the treasure hunt, the ARG storyline, the puzzle cards, the online community. If one got frustrating, another was always fresh."

Perhaps the core struggle the ARG genre faces is not a lack of interest, but a need to balance bigger audiences with an experience that still feels intimate and special



Darley's discovery marked the successful climax to the game's first season, and it's given the Perplex City team a number of things to work on in the future. The biggest change is that, in step with the world of videogames, Perplex City is going episodic. "This is really important," explained **Adrian Hon**, Mind Candy's director of play. "It's just too difficult to get into ARGs at the moment: unless you start playing right at the beginning, it's impossible to catch up. So instead of having one long, continuous story, we're going to have episodes lasting from two weeks to two months."

Most ARGs so far have been determinedly niche in appeal, and their origins as advertising tie-ins (two of the most popular, The Beast and I Love Bees, promoted the movie AI and *Halo 2* respectively) limits the size and diversity of the player base. Hon puts Perplex City's relatively high profile down to the cards rather than the prize money. "I think ARGs with a physical presence can often fare much better than those that are solely online. The fact that we sell the cards in a lot of places gets us a more mainstream audience."



Perplex City involves a complex tale of intergalactic theft. Part of the appeal of ARGs is the manner in which participants unravel the story as they follow clues through different media, often changing the course of the narrative through their own actions

Season Two of Perplex City starts in April, but the place of ARGs in the gaming landscape remains undecided. "The future is going to see them become much more accessible, and explore more revenue models," argues Hon. "They place story first, and like the Wii, they offer an innovative new mode of interaction, where you use the tools and devices that you already use everyday, like Google, Hotmail and Skype." Perhaps the core struggle the genre faces is not a lack of interest, but a need to balance bigger audiences with an experience that still feels intimate and special. Niche by nature, ARGs will have to hide the crowds and continue to present secret worlds to be explored, if they're to keep the player from turning into just another virtual tourist.



The Receda Cube, unearthed by Darley (above, with Hon) in early February. In the final days of the game the general location of the cube was well known and many players converged on the site. It was Darley's interest in archeology that gave him the edge, however





Before joining CD Projekt, Madej worked on an "extremely amateur" game called *Rabid Dogs* ("kind of *Jagged Alliance* but for adults") which sold very well in Poland due to its broad, satirical humour



independence is not when you can do whatever you want, but when you can choose who you want to hear. Developing a game without input from others is just stupid.

It is quite unusual to see an RPG with a single lead character.

I don't think character choice in a role-playing game is essential. Character development is more essential. In most games, you just make your character before the game starts. Then during the game it doesn't have much effect what you choose. We've just shifted those choices from before the game to during the game. He has his history, his appearance, his charisma, but you can do even more things with the character than when you've chosen one. I can count on my fingers the options for a warrior in D&D, for example.

> **"I'm personally very proud of the ending, I think it's one of the most interesting final struggles of any game, really something original"**

You've added your own new story to the Witcher universe, taking place after the books. Are you happy with it?

The storyline, actually, was kind of compromised. We knew we had to tell the first story that would be easy to understand for people who don't know Geralt and his world. But I'm personally very proud of the ending, I think it's one of the most interesting final struggles of any game, really something original. We worked it out before the start. It's good when you're making a game knowing that the end is good.

How did Sapkowski react to the game?

At first he was quite reluctant, not very interested. It was because there was a movie made in Poland which was terrible crap. It's quite difficult to explain – generally there was corruption and money-laundering behind the film. It was ridiculous, the movie cost a lot of money and it looked terrible. After that Sapkowski tried to cut off all adaptations. But now, after seeing the game a few times, he likes it and it's become a regular thing, we have more and more co-operation with him.

You don't often see book adaptations.

No, I think the best one was *Betrayal At Krondor* [a 1993 Sierra RPG based on Raymond E Feist's novel] a very old game which had completely the same story. Mostly adaptations are just marketing. Visuals were a great problem for us, in the book it's very simple: 'Geralt was walking down the street.' In the game you have to make the street, buildings, streets crossing the street, the town you're in, people on the street, animals, weather... One sentence in a book is a month's work for us. But now fans are excited with *The Witcher*'s looks. We've actually created something that will be the reference for other adaptations of the world.

There's a lot of romance and sex in *The Witcher*, which is quite rare in games.

Yes, but it's also quite rare in typical fantasy. Name me a single bit of eroticism in Tolkein. Also, there can be a misunderstanding, the game and the world are not about sexuality or eroticism – it's just like our world in which those things exist and people are not afraid to speak about it.



CD Projekt is clearly hoping to be able to develop a sequel to *The Witcher*; the ending of the first game will apparently provide more questions than it does answers, and the enigmatic Geralt's quest to discover his identity will "not be resolved this time"

For many people, sex is a driving force in their lives; ask any girl how to have influence on men, it's the simplest way. It works the same way in *The Witcher*'s world, people are talking about sex, it's a major motivation for many people, it's just natural.

You've had to add things to Sapkowski's world in order to make it work as a game; were there any of those additions that you're worried about?

The biggest work was with the combat system and character description. In the books, the character is still a secret, his powers are still a mystery. Even in the fifth book he does things you never imagined he could because they weren't described. In our game, we have to describe everything, so we destroy this mystery behind the Witchers. We demythologise them.

Last year's winners, clockwise from top: Log2n's *Flux*, Rule of Thumb's *Gal-Ex: Spatial Delivery*, Phaigo Interactive's *Spaceport* and Artisan's *Metalheads*. all are showcased at daretobedigital.com

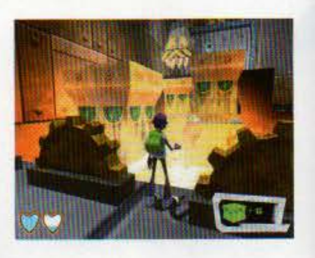
EVENT

Building a digital nation

The UK's premier design contest becomes a wholly British – and Irish – affair







The Dare To Be Digital competition turns eight this year with a number of changes, the most significant being its expansion from a single-venue event to one with a presence in England, Ireland and Scotland. Previously hosted exclusively by Abertay University in Dundee, the home of the initiative, the festival now hopes to almost double its number of entrants to between 60 and 80.

As before, the core event will be the ten-week design competition in which teams of developers must design and build a fully functioning prototype game. Four teams from Scotland will be selected this year, but for the first time the event will run parallel to another held at Queen's University, Belfast. A launch event at Dublin's Digital Hub in February drew over 100 visitors, though only ten places are on offer. The location of Dare's English event, meanwhile, has yet to be decided.

August 12-14 will see an entirely new addition: Dare ProtoPlay. An exhibition showcasing this year's entrants and scheduled to run immediately prior to the closing Awards Ceremony in Dundee, it also runs parallel with the Edinburgh Interactive cultural festival. ProtoPlay promises public hands-on time with the competing games, together with an opportunity to vote on the eventual winner.

Renowned for providing an effective gateway into the videogames industry, Dare To Be Digital provides specialist help and support, together with weekly training sessions for its contestants. Winners of the 2006 event included Artisan's *Metalheads*, which received the Most Commercial Potential award, Log2n's *Flux*, recognised for having the greatest innovation and creativity, and Rule Of Thumb's *Gal-ex: Spatial Delivery*, for best use of technology. A £2,000 prize was awarded to each.

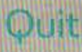
Continue

Going inside-out
More scandalously pretty reversible game covers

Print shops
High-res game art and A1 paper together at last

Norway's Film Fund
And its willingness to back game projects

Quit



Spines
Humanity is yet to adapt to the weight of the PS3

Real-world Tetris
Moving sofas, crates, pianos, shelves and cats

Apologising
One sorry ought to be enough, oughtn't it?



Author: Joe Abercrombie
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 9780752874296

BEFORE THEY ARE HANGED

The second book in Abercrombie's battle-hardened fantasy series opens up the action

Those of a certain age and persuasion often find themselves drawn to the middle of a trilogy – think Empire Strikes Back. This syndrome is certainly embodied in Before They Are Hanged, the centre section of Joe Abercrombie's The First Law series: now the introductions are over, the real action can begin. The main fighting thrust comes in the unlikely, limping shape of Union inquisitor Glokta. Sent unwillingly to oversee the defence of coastal city Dagoska, he finds treachery within, while outside the crumbling walls the fearsome Gurkish hordes arrive. The situation doesn't seem to be much improved when he tortures and beheads the enemy's emissary, but thanks to his sharp implements, the information he gains is sufficient to start unravelling the situation.

Meanwhile, a world away, the underlying strand of the entire The First Law series is dragged onwards as a motley band of adventurers – ageing warrior Ninefingers, grumpy wizard Bayaz and haughty aristocrat Jezal dan Luthar among them – picks its way through the dead wastelands at the end of the earth in the search for an ancient artifact that could right thousands of years of necromancy. And, providing a somewhat less significant plotline, Captain West sits in frozen fields, trying to control the dandy fancies of his erstwhile commander, Crown Prince Ladisla. It's all rip-roaring stuff of course, but with a modicum of depth too. No doubt there's plenty more to come.



Author: Jonathan Barnes
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 9780575079410

THE SOMNAMBULIST

A pulp version of Victorian London and the grotesque power of poetry combine in Barnes' sparky debut

It's not the fault of Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd that their twisting of fact and fiction into convoluted psychogeographies for London's dark lanes, gutters and madhouses have stirred up such devoted followers. Now it seems that almost every young literary buck is out to take such templates and rewrite Victorian penny dreadfuls for our ultra-knowing contemporary palette. Actually, Jonathan Barnes' first novel isn't a bad stab at the genre. Conjuror, detective and all-round Sherlock Holmes-type Edward Moon, together with his unspeaking companion, The Somnambulist, find themselves down on their uppers when their failing theatre is burnt down. Thankfully though, evil deeds are afoot in Limehouse and the East End, so it's not long before the pair are recruited by the authorities to uncover a plot taking in a fake spiritualist, bearded ladies, the misguided nature of poetry obsessives, and the incarnation of the great city itself. There's even a rather bewildering return to the sort of crossed authorial trickery thought to have died out in the mid-1990s.

So it's a measure of Barnes' success that everything flows in a generally coherent manner. There are certainly lots of genuine historical signposts bashed into the ground to entice further background research for those inclined. And even if, overall, the story ends up a bit overcooked – the denouement feels both spectacular and anticlimactic – there's enough going on to ensure an honest measure of enjoyment as the pages turn.

Manhunt 2

FORMAT: PS2, PSP, Wii **PUBLISHER:** TAKE-TWO



The gutter press can look forward to some more exploitation, this time courtesy of Rockstar's new London studio. Toronto take on the Wii version, where the gesture control should be interesting

Half-Life 2: Orange/Black Box Editions

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EA



Rumour becomes fact as EA confirms a title – and further delay – for the complete *Half-Life 2* package. Hopefully *Episode 2*, *Portals* and *Team Fortress* now all have time to prepare for the autumn

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION



Hopefully Z-Axis can get over *X-Men: The Official Game* and make this a war worth fighting on PS3. *Wolfenstein: Tides Of War* studio Nerve handles things on 360, which may just prove the safer bet

Mercenaries 2: World In Flames

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS2, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** EA



The publisher mystery is finally blown to atoms, along with the tenuous suggestion that Pandemic would keep this PS3 exclusive. All four platform versions can expect a simultaneous release

Hellboy

FORMAT: 360, PSP, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI



Guillermo Del Toro once promised strict, personal quality control for this comic adaptation, which interestingly seems more faithful to that source than to his own big-budget movie adaptation

Super Paper Mario

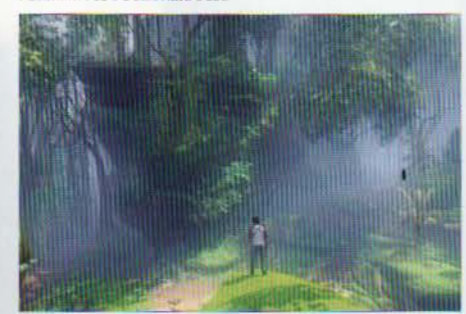
FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



Mario jumps from his initial platform as it disappears into the abyss. What influence the Wii Remote will have on the ambitious 2D versus 3D design is unknown, but don't expect a revolution

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SCEE



Another secret identity is disclosed as Naughty Dog's jungle op becomes more than just an E3 video. The hope now is that the unusually fluid animation proves to be more than just an E3 fib

Grim Grimoire

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** NIPPON ICHI



Published by Nippon Ichi but developed by Vanillaware, it's an SRPG with a less than usual perspective – it's a side-scroller. Summoned creatures and formation attacks are the order of play

Wing Commander Arena

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** EA



Boutique XBLA developer Gaia Industries joins EA in-house for this unexpected return. Early footage shows 3D visuals but rigid 2D action – hardly encouraging for fans of Origin's series



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

FoolYoo

http://splax.net/game/foolyoo.html

If you took the katana swipes of *WarioWare Twisted*, and blended them with the endlessly oncoming enemies of *House Of The Dead*, the result would be something like *FoolYoo* – a breezy scribble 'em up tainted by a sense of impending doom. But it's the elegant presentation and hypnotic soundtrack that make it more than the sum of its (borrowed) parts.

Although entirely in Japanese, the simple sword-slashing mouse action means there's little scope for confusion, whether you're cutting down demons or slicing up vegetables for your sensei's soup. The mouse controls are precise and responsive (although the recommended method of play is through the Wii's Opera browser, for obvious reasons), and the pared-down design is a masterclass in evocative simplicity.

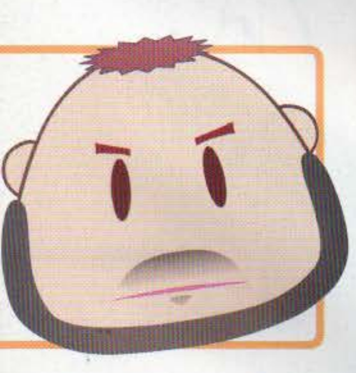
While the mechanics never create any real scope for complexity, the rate at which the enemies pile up makes for a visceral action game. In a pre-Wario universe, *FoolYoo* would have been an innovative marvel. Now it's simply beautifully presented, engaging, and full of strange humour.

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Following the movies

Brick Bardo asks: can the Japanese cinema industry be a model for games?



These days, home-grown movies are very popular in Japan, at least so it is said. I don't understand that very well myself. It wasn't until 1975 that movies from overseas became popular in Japan, and then up until 1985 there was some rivalry between the two but the Japanese movie industry just kept being beaten in terms of market share year after year. In 2002 it reached rock bottom, representing less than 20 per cent of the market. Japanese people were saying: "Japanese movies? Who watches them?" But that changed in 2004 with the movie industry gaining back popularity to a point when, in 2006, it became number one again, 21 years after it lost this position.

There are various reasons behind the demise of the Japanese movie industry. The films were often too dark, their content was not very 'cool' and they were very technically limited. But that does not mean that in amongst all this a few movies were not different. There were some that met with some success.

Compared to other countries, Japan is a very expensive place, especially when it comes to culture. But the cost of making a movie can be far lower than the budget required overseas, especially in the US. A ¥1 billion budget (£4.3 million) is considered a huge project in Japan, so when it gets to ¥2 billion then it is seen as something highly exceptional. But most Japanese movie budgets range from ¥100 million (£430,000) up to a few billion yen. Kurosawa Akira's Ran, a period movie that depicts the fall of a warlord with echoes of King Lear about it, defied the Japanese movie industry's history by going through the roof in terms of budget, using no less than ¥2.4 billion (£10.3 million). In comparison, James Cameron's movie at the time, a little thing called The Terminator, cost around ¥1.7 billion (£7.3 million). This was 20 years ago, but in Japan this has not changed much since, in contrast to the skyrocketing budgets seen in Hollywood movies.

And there is another key reason why, for many years, Japanese movies were taking a back seat in the domestic market. There are just too many foreign movies being released in Japan. You can't imagine the wide range of movies being shown here from many countries, starting with Hollywood and England, France and Italy, but also Poland, the Czech Republic, Hong Kong, South Korea, China, South Africa. You name it. Of course, that does not mean they are all great movies, and they range from pure entertainment to pure art. But 2006 saw a breakthrough, as Japanese movies finally tipped the balance of numbers against the foreign competition with 417 released as opposed to 404 from overseas.

In a way, you could say that there is no other country that is so unwilling to protect its own culture. Japan should invest more in its movie industry, and not just the small amount of money it is given today. Other countries in the area are spending far more, and have even set up rules such as those in South Korea where foreign movies can only represent ten per cent of the market.

Many in Japan think that anime and manga, along with games, are proud and important artforms that represent Japan on the world stage and bring a lot to the economy. Yet despite that, the country is not helping those industries much

Of course the media are focusing on this new trend of the Japanese movie industry rising against its overseas competition. But the coverage is not all positive and critics can still be heard: "This movie is technically nothing better than a TV series," or: "This movie's success is due to the popularity of the TV series it's based on," or even: "This movie isn't successful because it's good, but because it has had a huge amount of money spent on it." Then there's: "Only a very small percentage of the movies are actually making money. The great majority do not," and: "Just because Japanese movies happen to be



The influx of overseas movies into Japan has certainly had an effect on the home-grown film industry, but will a resurgence in both the making and popularity of Japanese films see more of them making their way to the west, even if in the form of remakes such as The Ring?

successful now, so many are made and they are too low quality." Some people think that, while the Japanese movie industry has managed to regain its momentum, there are too many bad films being made, and there is a high probability that this resurgence won't last long.

And all this has started to sound like something I heard in another industry. It sounds like we are not talking about movies, but games! This is very similar to things I heard about the PlayStation and PS2, especially at the end of those platforms' lives. I'm pretty sure that the same things could be heard back at the time of the recovery after the videogame crash of 1983.

Many in Japan think that anime and manga, along with games, are proud and important artforms that represent Japan on the world stage and bring a lot to the economy. Yet despite saying things like that, the country is not helping those industries much. Japan seems to be unable or unwilling to help its important assets.

Should the Japanese movie industry be able to keep its dominant position domestically, this could be a model for the future of the Japanese games industry. I believe people in the games industry should start thinking about that.

Having said that, this year in Japan, Spider-Man 3 and Pirates of the Caribbean 3 will still be huge hits despite being from overseas.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Silent Hunter 4: Wolves Of The Pacific



Hopefully these last minute delays will mean a lack of early patches and a seaworthy vessel. Ambitious visuals are all well and good, but *Dark Messiah* highlighted the risks
PC, UBISOFT

Soul Cradle



The news that Nippon Ichi are doing anything at all is enough to excite loyal fans. The news that it's 'doing' Advance Wars is enough to send them into a full-blown swoon
PS2, NIPPON ICHI

Sim City DS



The enemy of all things productive has blighted Japan's workforce already, and if the rumours are to be believed it's heading this way like a city-gobbling flying saucer
DS, EA

Play beyond

On PC, who's to say where the gaming ends?



In game tweaking circles, Monolith's *FEAR* is as fresh a game as any. Call it extensibility or call it bad optimisation; either way, the game is one of the most demanding, and in turn one of the most rewarding that this community has seen

Crysis wants you to believe that anything is possible, which is why it's giving you not just a sophisticated sandbox world but also, in its nanosuit, a sophisticated set of spades. And it doesn't end there.

Here's another possibility: that the game will actually prove a tremendous letdown. The chances seem remote, but maybe its action won't evolve as it's supposed to, and for all its physics permutations and airborne combat there'll be little that justifies Crytek's years of design. Maybe it really will feel like *Far Cry* meets Aliens meets Top Gun and that combustible cocktail of ingredients simply won't ignite.

But here's the more interesting possibility: maybe there's a large proportion of its audience that doesn't give a damn whether it's one thing or the other, because what it's really looking forward to is another part of the package, CryEngine 2.

In **E**172's look at PC gaming, a question arose as to what the word 'gaming' actually means. What is a game? And, more to the point, what isn't? Is gambling on the traffic lights as you drive to work not a game? Are relationships not a game? Or politics?

Likewise, who really has the right to say what is and isn't going to be part of *Crysis*? Is the risk/reward of overclocking hardware, for example, any less thrilling or valid than landing a dangerous jump or surviving a bout of run-and-gun? Is holding out for that new PC, building up the parts and unleashing the result not just an instance of good old fashioned stockpile and release?

When you delve into the backend of the Doom 3 Engine or *Oblivion*'s GameBryo and eek out additional detail or frames per second, is that not the same thrill as seeking out unlockable extras within those games themselves? Ask a PC enthusiast, and they'll probably tell you it's a better one.

Amusingly, this hobby of game tweaking has brought many an unlikely, even lacklustre game success and long life. Just look at the communities that have built recently around *NFS: Most Wanted*, *Call Of Juarez* and, of all things, *Boiling Point*. Being flexible and open in your game technology might not just be programmer's etiquette; maybe it's a type of game design as well.

Who knows, maybe we'll be playing Firefox next.

FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **VARIOUS**
DEVELOPER: **VARIOUS**
ORIGIN: **VARIOUS**
RELEASE: **MARCH 23 ONWARDS**

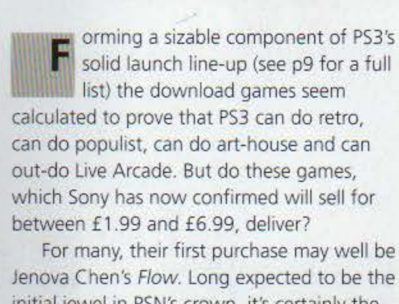
PlayStation Network games

The first generation of games arrive for PS3's download service. So is it a virtual console, a virtual arcade, or a virtual something else?





Blast Factor's basic play can be a little pedestrian, but even boss encounters (above) and the use of a pad-flick to unleash a tidal wave which topples armoured enemies over (right) don't quite seem to be enough to expand the game's horizons



Forming a sizable component of PS3's solid launch line-up (see p9 for a full list) the download games seem calculated to prove that PS3 can do retro, can do populist, can do art-house and can out-do Live Arcade. But do these games, which Sony has now confirmed will sell for between £1.99 and £6.99, deliver?

For many, their first purchase may well be Jenova Chen's *Flow*. Long expected to be the initial jewel in PSN's crown, it's certainly the most polished and confident of the games so far available. Drifting from one layer of water to another, in search of plankton, in flight from predators and in time to a responsive soundtrack of impossibly relaxing ambient effects, it's a beautifully realised and genuinely unique experience. But what's unexpected for a game as fresh-thinking as this is how many existing games it calls to mind when it lands on a console in front of your sofa. There's a hint of *Super Monkey Ball* in the glimpses you get of the next level floating beyond the current one. There's a little *Katamari* kick to be had from assimilating the flow's inhabitants just by brushing against them. And, for GameCube curio hunters, there's a recollection of the cubist *Animal Leader* in the sudden viciousness with which you can rip the glowing life-orbs out of competing creatures' spines. There's no disputing the mesmeric beauty that's been apparent since the game's freeware PC debut, or the efficacy of the Sixaxis tilt controls, but there is perhaps a question mark over how often players will return to its waters once its role as a showcase curiosity is exhausted.







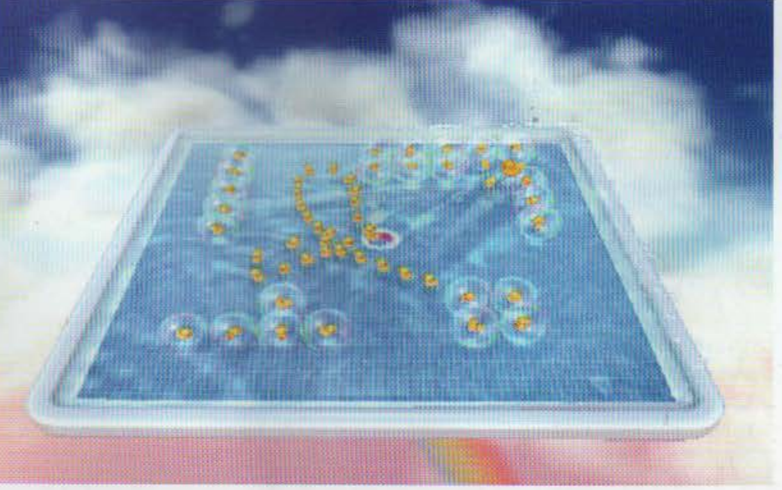
But if PS3 can be experimental and arty, it can also be ruthlessly populist. *Go! Sudoku*, made by Kuju, is a neon-outlined take on the ubiquitous fad. While not everyone – and perhaps especially not everyone most drawn to the peculiarly stultifying time-filler – will take to the visuals, there's nothing to object to mechanically. With hundreds of puzzles, time attack and competitive modes, and as smooth an input compromise as you could hope to wring out of a joypad, it's a solid start to a series which will also include *Go! Puzzle*, and could easily grow to be a genre all of its own.

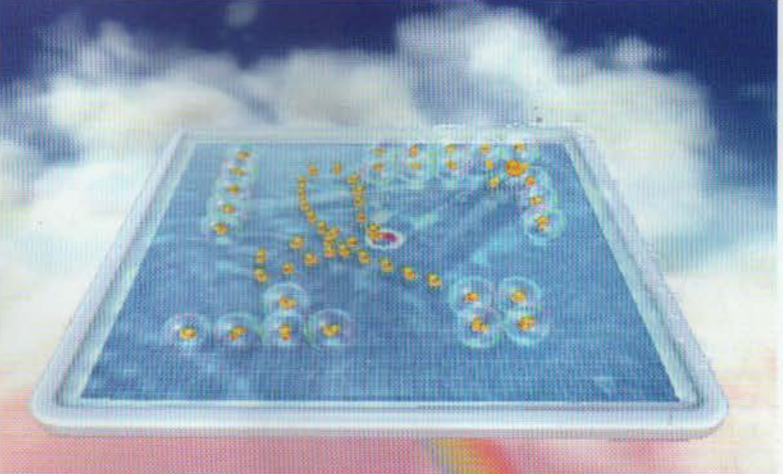
It may be that, freed from the expectations of the 'Arcade' tag that the 360 wears with such pride, Sony will be able to produce a much more rounded menu

Next as a candidate for family fun comes *Super Rub-A-Dub*, the game evolution of the infamous duck demo. Now a tilting-tray challenge, in the manner of *Super Monkey Ball*, it asks you to float your duck around the level, freeing the ducklings from their bubbles and leading them to the exit. Pitfalls come in the form of sharks, who chase your offspring, whirlpools that trap them in place and precarious ledges over which they can plunge. Controlled entirely through the Sixaxis tilt controller, the sensitivity of the device is made clear. But, despite some









Super Rub-A-Dub looks idyllic, but can be grindingly frustrating, in a way familiar to players of any of its siblings. It makes you wonder what a download game with the PS1 dinosaur would have been like





The spidery beauty of *Flow*'s creatures is eye-catching, but the truly engaging element is the gelid, tidal swell of the water you move through – organic, restful and unpredictable





Go! Sudoku may not be the sexiest of products, but its solid implementation may find even committed sceptics lured into the infuriatingly soothing process of grid-filling

ingenuity in level design, *Rub-A-Dub* doesn't immediately seem able to offer the feel of other tilt pretenders like *Mercury Meltdown* or *Kororinpa*. There's no real sense of the fluid dynamics of the water, and the controls can feel a little light and insecure rather than inspiring confidence. And, while the form factor of the Sixaxis makes it a convincing peripheral for driving vehicles or taking the reins of dragons, it isn't so convincing as a tool for these more abstract tasks.

For more dedicated gamers comes *Lemmings*, a big brother to Team 17's PSP update of the classic. As ever, there's little to disguise your craving for a mouse, but the simplified control scheme is laudably straightforward, and the level settings are charismatic – proving that HD can do just as much justice to 2D as 3D. There can't be many people left – certainly not people looking to be first in line for a PS3 – who are yet to make up their minds as to whether the blend of lightning reactions and tactical thinking is their cup of tea. It's not yet clear just how robust the level design quality is overall – some early examples are dull, some too dependent on repeated restarts, but others are devious and disarming.

Which leaves, as poster boy for the gamer's game, Sony Santa Monica's *Blast Factor*. Thanks to *Mutant Storm* and *Geometry Wars* the twin-stick shooter – a genre once so close to obsolescence – has become the game no download service seems complete without. Sadly, however – and thanks again to those two games – it's probably the one genre PSN should have avoided. *Blast Factor*'s conceit – that you're cleansing cells of germs and viruses – is neat enough, but the enemy and level design doesn't have the virtuoso cunning of *Mutant Storm*, and the light-storm visuals can't hold a candle to the fiery flair of *Geometry Wars*. Add to that the fact that it's a game type which is merciless in its exposure of the shortcomings of the Sixaxis' sticks, and it becomes a proposition that does more to highlight the strengths of Live Arcade than the strengths of PSN. Despite elaborations like faintly *Gradius*-inspired boss battles, and the ability to send a shockwave through enemies with a shake of the controller, the overall impression is still lightweight.

One of the revolutions of the 360 was the feeling that you could, in all seriousness, simply buy the hardware and go home and have something to play. Now, for the Euro launch, PS3 can say the same. Where Sony's service needs to mark itself out is in the breadth of software it can provide. It may be that, freed from the expectations of the 'Arcade' tag that the 360 wears with such pride, it's able to produce a much more rounded menu than Microsoft's more controlled approach has seen. And it seems already apparent that, freed from the size constraints that Live Arcade games have only just escaped from (these pre-release PSN games weigh in at around 100-250 MB), there's scope for elaborate projects as well as more wide-ranging ones. The power of PS3 is taking a long time to emerge, but with the arrival of a credible PSN line-up, it's one step closer to proving its worth.



The cartoon aesthetics of the PSP version of *Lemmings* translate very happily to the PS3's full HD screen, giving a creamy solidity to a game which historically had always sailed as close to 'garish' as it had to dementedly cute



Gripping stuff

Alongside heavyweights like *Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection* and *GT HD*, fresher treats are in store for PSN. One appealing prospect is a conversion of *Gripshift*, Sidhe's sorely underappreciated PSP kart-puzzler (E156, 7/10). Testing flair and nerve as surely as driving skills, it stands a good chance of being as unexpected a hit on PSN as *Marble Blast Ultra* was on XBLA. Also due is David Jaffe's *Calling All Cars*. Promising a cops and robbers-inspired multiplayer take on a demolition derby, it could well take attention away from the PS3's more sober online games.

The Witcher

Will Poland's biggest ever game project end up, like its hero, a stranger in a strange land?

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **CD PROJEKT**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E138, E151, E164**



Push comes to shove

Geralt's signs include a fireball, a shield, a charm that will temporarily control enemies and – sure to be a favourite – a Star Wars-style 'force push' that floors enemies and opens them to finishing moves. The latter is an example of the very physical and spatial nature of the combat, unusual in an RPG, reinforced by the three stances: one strong and defensive, one centred on fast attack runs and one designed to deal with multiple enemies. Geralt's fluid motion-captured animations are a pleasure to watch, and set the tempo for a gentle, hypnotic combo system.

You can't ever accuse Poland's CD Projekt of not doing things its own way: moving from localisation and distribution to development, attempting an RPG epic as its first game, choosing to adapt the works of a Polish author as yet untranslated into English (although Andrzej Sapkowski's Witcher saga is soon to be published in the UK) and funding this huge undertaking largely by itself. And while it's true that some of the claims of originality CD Projekt is making have been heard many times before in the world of the RPG – the dark low fantasy setting, the moral choices and adaptive storyline – it's bucking the trend in one important way that could be either a blessing or curse. Unlike most western RPGs, *The Witcher* asks you not to make a character but to assume one. It has a hero.

The albino monster-slayer Geralt is, thankfully, a magnetic lead. He's handsomely drawn, animated with athletic grace, and his combination of swordfighting, alchemy and 'signs' (basic spellcasting) neatly covers all the RPG bases. It ought to be no hardship to slip into his skin. The focus on one character whose abilities, though they can be specialised, are fairly clearly defined by the lore has also allowed CD Projekt to develop a superbly transparent, satisfying active combat system for its game (apparently much admired by its mentors at BioWare, and rightly so). It does away completely with pause menus or button commands in favour of stance-switching and well-timed single physical and magical attacks on the left and right mouse buttons. Its tactical ceiling might be a little low, but that will depend on the enemy design as much as anything else.



The game's ending will apparently offer more questions than answers, the amnesiac Geralt's search for a place in the world to be resolved in a hoped-for later instalment

More of a worry is how deep and rewarding specialisation can be. It will be impossible to explore all of Geralt's 250 abilities in one run through the game, something CD Projekt hopes will encourage replays. But with just five signs to learn, the majority of skills, split into bronze, silver and gold talent tiers, look likely to be to be incremental buffs and not all that exciting. Players will need some convincing that an alternative character build will feel different enough to play to warrant the time.



Many locations are classed as 'safe' by day, under which circumstances combat becomes impossible. Children and characters with critical plot roles can't be attacked either

Replays are more likely to be encouraged by the supple storyline's three alternative endings. Your influence over events seems to be handled (if not written – the English script desperately needs a fresh pass) with some sensitivity, building through gradual choices with delayed consequences rather than abruptly branching at a crude moral choke point. It should offer a differing experience along the way as well as in the final act, but just how compelling a story it is will be the final decider. *The Witcher* is already an attractive RPG in an intriguing world, but for a game four years in the making it still has a lot of rough edges, and the next few months will be the toughest yet.



While Tenno adapts to the poisons he encounters, the game's other inhabitants aren't so lucky. Monsters and madmen are common foes





FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **D3 PUBLISHER**
DEVELOPER: **DIGITAL EXTREMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Dark Sector

Illuminated and mutated, what was once a stealth-in-space title comes back down to Earth

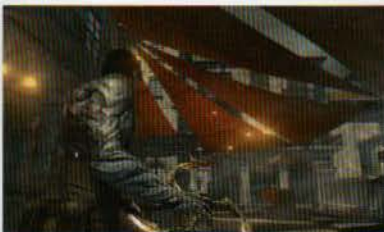
Alas, we'll never know what that E3 2005 video could have become. For those unfamiliar, it was a tantalising eight-minute glimpse of a game that bore almost no resemblance to the one you see here, clad in cold silver with Shirow-esque technology and a percussive soundtrack, its exotically-suited hero pictured largely in shadow. There was little sign of a game there, but one hell of a sense of ambience – the air within its pressurised corridors just ready to burst out of the nearest airlock into the vacuum of space. In short, it looked like the greatest game Kojima never made. Or the few good bits of *Dino Crisis 3*.

But the problem with putting together such accomplished target footage is that you win fans as well as investors, and there are bound to be some who look at this new *Dark Sector*, with its *RE4* camera position and wall-hugging action, with a hand over their mouths. A word of reassurance: at least its hero's name is still eccentric.

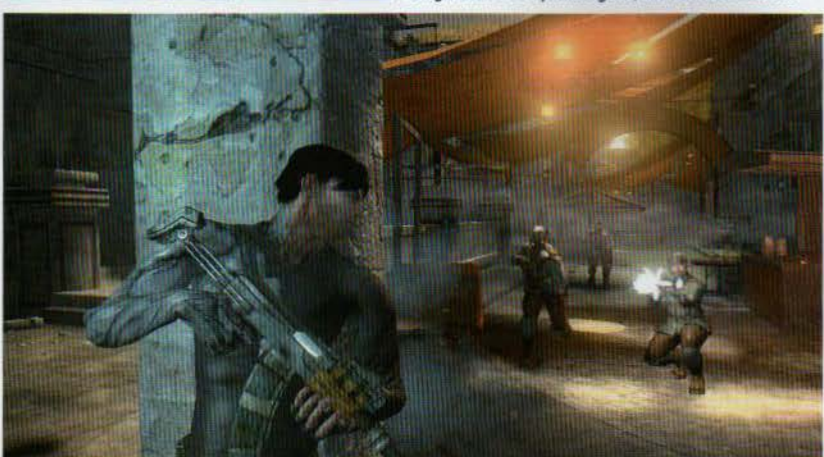
Hayden Tenno is a CIA clean-up operative on mission in a derelict, fictional Soviet state. Exposed to the same mutagen he's been sent to investigate, his path through *Dark Sector* becomes an evolutionary one, his weapon of choice a large-bladed glaive much like that of pulp-tastic '80s movie Krull. The default melee attacks are as unpleasant as its shape suggests, critical strikes able to slice enemies clean in half.

And here's where things get interesting again. A single glaive toss can strike multiple targets, both sentient and environmental.





Tenno starts off as a fairly conventional videogame soldier, designed to be accessible to newcomers. But *Dark Sector* is being touted as a superhero game, and he's sure to evolve



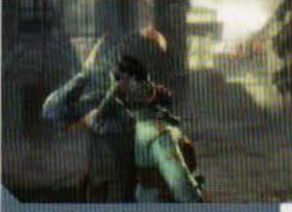




The properties of one target (defined by the game as an element) are carried on to the next, one example seeing gas transmitted from a valve to a flame to the unfortunate soldier next in line. AI seems passive enough to accommodate the elaborate targeting system this requires, and for once the ability to hide behind corners seems to facilitate strategy rather than stand in for it. With each new level, a new element is introduced.

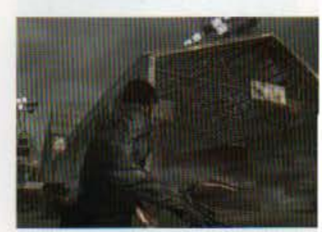
As for the downcast urban setting, with its shanty town vibe and subdued lighting: that's a change of direction Digital Extremes happily takes the blame/credit for. The idea is to bring out Tenno's superhuman properties by dropping into the most unremarkable environments – a risky artistic endeavour if ever there was one. Perhaps if Tenno stood thoroughly apart from the stealth 'em up pack he'd be a more deserving showpiece, but at first glance the whole stubble and mutant arm thing seems a tad passé.

The developer is also keen to play down the use of the word stealth in its marketing literature and in-game text, and despite the more immediate similarities to *Splinter Cell* and its ilk, the game's rule-set and level design make it a generally freer affair. The space scenario may be gone, but room to breathe is a welcome substitute.



Mutagenre

Zelda's boomerang attacks spring immediately to mind when the glaive is set in motion, but *Dark Sector*'s mission structure can be more like that of *STALKER*. Not every NPC has to be sliced in two, and helping out the odd vagrant or refugee can grant access to hidden shops or missions within the sometimes open environments. In the demo we're given, however, the action is more linear. A number of multiplayer modes are set to appear, though Digital Extremes remains cagey as to what they might entail, or which of the game's personalities they'll choose to adopt.



The glaive is clearly the star in this new show, though the idea of having a muted backdrop is a legacy of the old E3 trailer





The developers boast that you will never find yourself adventuring in the same area twice, and the size of *Vanguard*'s world of Telon makes this sound more like a plausible idea than an impossible exaggeration





Vanguard: Saga Of Heroes

Sigil's latest is certainly aptly named, but is an assault on WOW's eight million subscribers wise?

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **KOCH (EUROPE) SOE (US)**
DEVELOPER: **SIGIL**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**

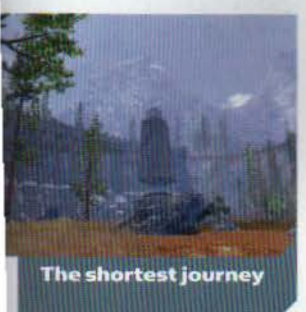
It doesn't take a marketing prodigy to catch the message hidden behind *Vanguard*'s bold slogan 'Set Yourself Free'. Poaching some of *World Of WarCraft*'s subscribers is certainly an attractive prospect, especially for an MMO developer determined to produce something as long-lasting as *Everquest*, which is on its 13th expansion.

Sigil has both eyes on the millions of players who entered the MMO market with *WOW* and could be ready for something a little deeper. On paper there's hardly an aspect of *WOW* which Sigil hasn't analysed and subsequently trumped for ingenuity and complexity. *Vanguard* boasts 15 classes, but divides them into healers, tanks, damage dealers and casters, neatly negating the problem of those that don't fit into a group dynamic. It also features a perfected iteration of *Everquest 2*'s involved crafting system, and harvesting where players specialise but can always help whoever starts the work.

The biggest draw of all is *Vanguard*'s diplomacy, a path that sits snugly alongside adventuring and crafting that Sigil's marketing manager **April Jones** explains in terms of a different fantasy epic. "It's like Gandalf. We all know he's powerful, but his reputation and who he knows is what's *really* powerful." Discussions are played out as a card game where everything you say adds to the pool your opponent can use to play cards of their own. Over time you'll gain reputation and influence, and you'll build up your deck of debating techniques, though whichever of the game's 19 diverse peoples you choose to play you always start with the 'race' card. Ultimately, Sigil wants to implement diplomats in adventuring quests, giving rounded groups the option to talk their way around obstacles.

But this is far from the only idea that didn't make it into the initial release. After five years in development with a rapidly aging engine it became clear *Vanguard* had to get out of the door, resulting in a fairly awkward launch of the game minus content that's since started appearing in patches. The timing is wince-inducing, with *Vanguard* stumbling on-stage just as the phenomenally successful *Burning Crusade* smoothly rejuvenates interest in *WOW*. It's doubly painful when you consider that Sigil suffered a similar blow back in 2004, with president **Jeff Butler** jokingly describing his main lesson from *EQ2* as "Don't launch at the same time as *World Of WarCraft*."

After leaving Microsoft to co-publish the game with Sony Online, Sigil's belief in its work is clear. But looking out across the sterile, empty world of *Vanguard*, you can't help but imagine the warmth of *WOW* and wonder if that faith is misplaced.



The shortest journey

Vanguard's many and varied modes of transport are more necessities than status symbols, required for crossing the huge world. Buying your first mount at level ten is just the beginning, since you'll want to equip it with horseshoes, saddlebags and armour before gradually working your way up to a vicious flying mount. But far more majestic are the player-crafted boats. Potentially paralleling galleons in size, these allow you to ferry your friends to any number of distant locales in high style. There are already plans on the drawing board for ship to ship combat, which if it comes about would be an interesting first for an MMO.





The lack of any kind of coherent visual or thematic style, and the woefully barren landscapes, conceal architecture and ideas that could otherwise have been quite striking

Vanguard's un-instanced player housing is a sizeable feather in its cap, although limited plots of prime real-estate will see the slower, more casual players banished to housing islands



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

Crush

A PSP original that puts the traditional platformer to bed while causing its players a fair few sleepless nights



Crush's visuals aren't best represented by static screens: in motion there's rather more charm than is apparent on the page

The name brings to mind girlie froth – dating games and sugary pop. The screenshots are more reminiscent of an even-more unappealing prospect – the gloomy, over-detailed slush of a poor PS2-to-PSP conversion. The reality, however, is much more enticing.

Crush instead joins a very exclusive clique, open only to the few games which truly think in three dimensions. Depicting the adventures of young man hospitalised for chronic insomnia, the game's starlit rooftops are the scene for some virtual somnambulation, as he tries to tackle the psychological 'blocks' which are preventing him from sleeping. It's hardly a leap of Freudian insight to discover that these mental blocks become the structure of a rather unique approach to platforming.

Based on puzzles, rather than precision, each level is a spatial impossibility, asking Danny to reach a goal but blocking his way with impossible gaps and towering walls. But Danny has the power to crush the 3D into 2D: pick a camera angle (top down, or looking on from front, back, left or right), activate his power, and the level will flatten accordingly. Then, with blocks pushed, switches toggled or power-ups nabbed, the game can be returned to its full-fat form, with all your changes left in place. It's one of those games where playing produces a perceptibly increased flow of blood to the brain, as well as a smug smile of satisfaction to the lips.









It takes a few minutes to adjust to seeing the squashed potential of each level, and there's a real challenge in honing the most efficient – that is to say, least 'crushing' – solution to each of the deviously designed puzzles

Professor Layton And The Mysterious Village

Part adventure game, part animation, part job interview from hell: Level 5 knows what's good for you, and for DS

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **LEVEL 5**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**



It's a perfect DS twist that the bottom screen can serve as a scratch pad while you puzzle your way toward a solution

Is it a good sign or a bad sign when a game can be as enjoyable on the back of an envelope as on the screens of a cutting-edge piece of technology? The lateral thinking puzzles that Professor Layton encounters on his point 'n' think adventures are robust enough that their appeal easily survives the transition.



Indeed, many will be familiar from a time long before electronic entertainment came into play, and their appeal is likely to prove as divisive now as then. So: how many times in a 24-hour period will a 12-hour digital clock show three identical consecutive numbers? How can you find the one light weight amongst eight seemingly identical weights if you're only allowed to use a set of balance scales twice? And just how do you move three wolves and three birds (right) across a river with a raft that can't carry less than one or more than two, allowing that whenever the wolves outnumber the birds a massacre ensues? If those are the kinds of questions that have you reaching for a pencil, Professor Layton promises heaven. For those glad to have left school behind, his appeal will remain the real mystery here.

But this allure doesn't stop at the gameplay on offer. Although the puzzles (triggered by exploring the static screens of the titular village and tapping on the inhabitants you find) have the clarity and charisma of *Brain Training*, the feel of the game is pure Belleville Rendezvous. A soothing burble of accordion accompanies your pedestrian explorations, and no character – be it male, female or vehicular – escapes without a hook nose, bent back or bowed legs. It's a charming and lavish world, well served by the 3D animated interludes, and makes the game a pleasant place to dally as you scratch your head at the puzzles. A forgiving save system and easy access to completed puzzles perfectly complement the game's easy charm.



There's surprisingly little discord between the rather functional presentation of the puzzles (above) and the lush stylistions of the main game's charismatic world

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **STARBREEZE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 30 (360) TBC (PS3)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164, E168**



The Darkness

Mafia hitman turned demonic shapeshifter turns his attention to multiplayer, as The Darkness nears completion

There was a time when it was the greatest sin in the book: tacked-on multiplayer. But Starbreeze is cheerily honest about the fact that the competitive mode of its supernatural FPS is not a major focus of the project. Instead, it seems inspired mostly by the team's own enthusiasm for the potential of pitting shape-shifting, wall-climbing Darklings against more conventional gun-power.

You can immediately see the appeal – a demonic take on the perfectly calibrated imbalance that stands at the heart of *Splinter Cell's* excellent spies versus mercenaries multiplayer. But you can also immediately see the problem: that the ambition of that imbalance means that this isn't the kind of multiplayer that is going to thrive under an absent-minded development eye. As a result, the current build is underwhelming – buggy, twitchy and a little chaotic – and the ability of players to morph from Darkling to human means a constant rain of opponents dropping from the ceiling before scurrying straight up again. More worryingly, level design doesn't yet seem to be equal to shaping these encounters, with players tending to cluster in open areas rather than finding tactical advantage in the architecture.

There's time – although not a great deal – for some of these concerns to be smoothed before release, but the clear message from Starbreeze is that it's confident there'll be enough value in the singleplayer to make this element a knockabout extra. The real frustration, then, is that it might have proved a more robust bonus if the team had aimed a little lower and relied on more tried and tested dynamics.



The Darklings form the most charismatic embodiment of hero Jackie Estacado's dark powers. In multiplayer, however, it's harder to find the balance between their increased mobility, but rather weaker melee attacks



The gunplay isn't yet convincing in *The Darkness'* multiplayer, and it won't be until the game is on general release that it becomes clear if the level design is full of subtle tactical detail, or just rather disappointingly bland

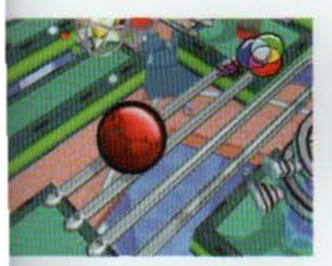
FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **IGNITION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH 30**

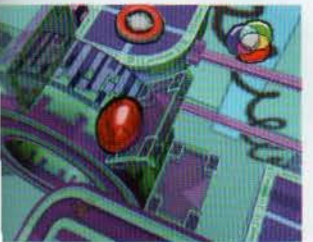
Mercury Meltdown Revolution

Morphing from the PSP poster boy to a Wii standard bearer, can Mercury manage to keep its original shape?

When *Mercury* first slid into view, back in **E**144, it had the distinction of being the first PSP game to be allowed out into the wild. It seemed a perfect ambassador for the console: its sharp metallic lines making the most of the screen, its intended tilt sensor making 'handheld' more a playing style than an arbitrary label. But the tilt sensor was not to be, and now, more than two years later, that original vision is finally fulfilled on a platform that would have been unimaginable back in the winter of 2004: the Wii.

So, after the success of the PSP sequel and PS2 conversion, through which *Mercury* has quietly grown to be a remarkably solid and viable franchise, is *Revolution* the ultimate version? In many respects yes: the mechanical refinements of *Meltdown* are just as clear here, with tight level designs brimming with tense, exhilarating challenge. On completing a level it's almost impossible not to immediately return in the hope of shaving some time off your racing line, or risking a tantalising shortcut. And the tilt controls are precise and well weighted, giving a direct connection with the action. But there's something about the way *Revolution* – a real gamer's game – bristles with time constraints, screen furniture, switches and bonuses that makes it sit a little uneasily on the Wii. You may find that your brain already automatically switches to relaxed mode when picking up the Remote, more receptive to the simpler charms of *Kororinpa*. Then again, at a time when the Wii line-up is worryingly bare, you may think a dose of *Mercury* is exactly what the console needs.





There's still something dazzlingly audacious about deciding to toon-shade something with no hard edges or fixed shape – it's a surprisingly sound choice



There's a strong visceral horror in watching your ball get sliced, stretched and nipped by the obstacales you meet







The visual style works well on Wii, making the most of its simple, vibrant colours and doing a consistently good job of communicating clearly the possibilities and pitfalls of what are some often dauntingly elaborate mechanics

Jade Empire: Special Edition

A whole generation late, the Xbox RPG starts running out of Steam



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**

At last PC gamers can get their hands on the chop-suey *KOTOR* as an all new special edition of *Jade Empire* finally arrives both on shop shelves and Steam. But for all the spin about 'three new layers of development' the changes seem relatively minor and designed to no more than placate a poorly treated market.

In the 'content' layer, the biggest additions are the two new fighting styles, a heavy, slow Iron Palm technique for followers of the 'Good' path of Open Palm, and a lightning fast Viper style for those who choose the 'Bad' path of Closed Palm. There's also an extra sword to wield and an extra demon to transform into, as well as the Xbox limited edition's player character of Monk Zeng.

The 'gameplay enhancement' layer touts tweaked AI and a new Jade Master difficulty setting that allows players who've finished the game to return to the start and do it all one more time using their high-level powers against superior enemies. Lastly, the game engine now supports higher resolutions, advanced lighting and particle effects.



That *Jade Empire* saw a two-year delay without any expansion to show for it is indicative of lost interest in a game that failed to capture the minds of the public in the same way that so many of BioWare's other projects continue to. With the addition of more quests and areas, and a speedier conversion, it's likely the game would have stood a chance of repeating the positive critical reception it received on the Xbox. As it stands it's not likely to affect PC gamers, many of whom are already jaded enough.



When even the disappointing *Enter The Matrix* could muster some dynamism in its kung-fu animations, it still frustrates that *Jade Empire*'s combat consists of little more than weightless attacks and colourful lights

The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles

Bethesda prepares an authentic world gone mad for Oblivion fans



FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES (PC), BETHESDA (360)**
DEVELOPER: **BETHESDA**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q2 2007**

Knights Of The Nine might have mercifully broken the teasing drip feed of miniature DLC with something more substantial, but it still felt like a release to make sure no one lost track of their *Oblivion* disc. Now the Bethesda money-spinning add-on machine is gearing up for its first true expansion, and it's looking every bit what fans have been waiting for.

The islands of the pack's title will appear off the west coast of Cyrodiil, but aren't the focus. Rather, a portal hidden away in them will transport the player to the realm of the Daedric prince of madness, Sheogorath, who recruits you as a champion to save his lands from his unfortunately named Daedric rival Jyggalag.

Sheogorath's realm will be a quarter of the size of the original game, but if *Oblivion* taught us anything with its enormous, if sometimes vacant, world it's that size doesn't matter. *Shivering Isles* looks exciting because the designers are aiming for something more focused and stuffed with imagination. The twin lands of Mania and Dementia you explore make for a beautiful dichotomy, with the bright, oversaturated colours and passionate residents of the former contrasting with the dank, dark, *Morrowind*-like environments and paranoid inhabitants of the latter. But the creativity extends to everything. Work for your insane master (whose fustian butler you can summon at any time, much to the servant's annoyance) includes assembling a replacement for the golem you defeat to get to him, and dispatching a party of stereotypical adventurers by reaching their chosen dungeon before they do and activating traps.

It's curious that a game marketed on having a world of near-endless quests and exploration is now getting expansions that tighten your experience and *reduce* the size of the world. Bethesda has sold us what we thought we wanted, and is now selling us what we need.

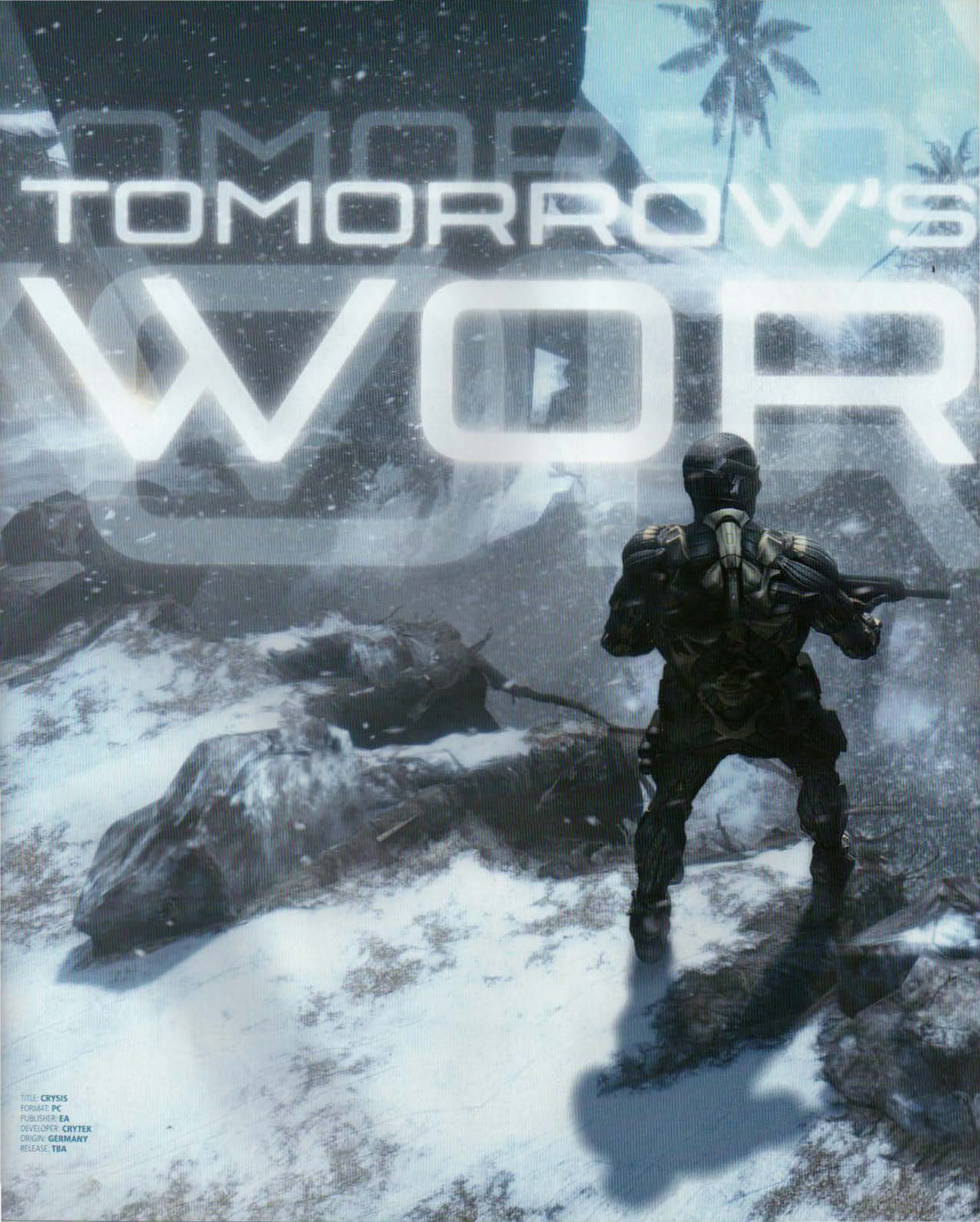


Knights of Order are invading Sheogorath's realm, intent on wreaking a cleansing known as The Greymarch on its inhabitants





The lands of Dementia and Mania should serve to satiate would-be heroes who were disappointed by the more generic fantasy setting offered by *Oblivion*



TOMORROW'S WOR

TITLE: **CRYSIS**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRYTEK**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **TBA**

As Crytek opens the doors to its new home, PC gaming's destination gives up more of its secrets

There was no cause for alarm when *Crysis* appeared at last year's Leipzig Game Convention, but a moment's worry wasn't out of the question either. In EA's business suite, a squared circle of cubicles with neither windows nor very much in the way of space, both game and developers seemed weary. "So, which level would you like to see?" asked **Bernd Diemer**, a succinctly spoken waif of a lead designer with a devil's haircut and active hands. And despite the option of a boss battle in which a 100-foot-high alien machine *threw a plane through an aircraft carrier*, the lure of the procedural falling tree was simply – inevitably – too much.

"At the time, you know, I was starting to get tired," he smiles, some six months later. "But the funny thing is that now, when we show this latest version, no one wants to see the trees – they want to see me grabbing guys, throwing them around and taking apart huts. And now I'm bored of taking down huts. At E3 last year we really pushed within the studio to get the procedural trees working right. It was kind of buggy what we showed, but people went crazy and now it's becoming this fad where if you do a jungle in a game, you have to have procedural trees. People get used to this stuff so fast."

It's entirely logical, given that lifelong reputation for being 'the jungle company', that people should want to see Crytek's next step. But for the maker of *Far Cry*, for a very long



Not every item of furniture in the CES demo can be picked up and thrown, but the options are plentiful enough. The helicopter that swoops down during the closing stages is a tempting target for a barrel toss, though hardly a wise one

time, that meant escape from the town of Coburg, south Germany, where the brothers Yerli grew up. Barely more than an oversized maisonette, the studio where we spoke last was over 100 miles from the nearest airport in a town where a new McDonalds deserved its own mention on the autobahn. Now, following a move in which 80 trucks moved 110 people in just two days, Crytek lives in the European gateway of Frankfurt, in a colossal office

Aircraft will be flown, gravity boots will be worn and the legacies of Far Cry will be stripped away

building shared with a nightclub and a furniture store, under a sky latticed by vapour trails.

But moving in, when you're up to your neck in the future of PC gaming, doesn't necessarily mean settling in. From the laser-printed A4 signage to the scattered water fountains and espresso machines, little in Crytek's new digs feels particularly established. Not past the point where it benefits the company's games, at least. A quick tour by business director **Avni Yerli** stops at PS3 R&D and middleware first, then the



multiplayer pit ("Do not remove anything unless your name's Yerli," reads the sign), a sound studio, and upstairs a fully featured mo-cap suite. A rather bizarre little oasis occurs en route: a single desk cloaked in leafy pot plants and home to a faux-antique globe. Yerli remarks: "That's a trial thing."

The company's MO has always seemed uniquely improvised, and it's no surprise to find a scrum model of development driving it now. Geared to projects in which little is certain and requirements often change, the idea is to tackle concepts rather than tasks, encouraging all aspects of development to come together in a way that traditional 'waterfall' development does not. For *Crysis*, leading the charge of Games For Windows and DirectX 10, it's hard to imagine a more sensible approach. "We're still deciding whether or not to adopt Vista globally, for office use," explains Diemer. "I think what we're doing here is what everyone's considering: will I or won't I upgrade? And I hope we'll be one of the reasons to do so. From a technical perspective, it's given the developers a lot to work with, and it always depends on what you do with the chances that you have."

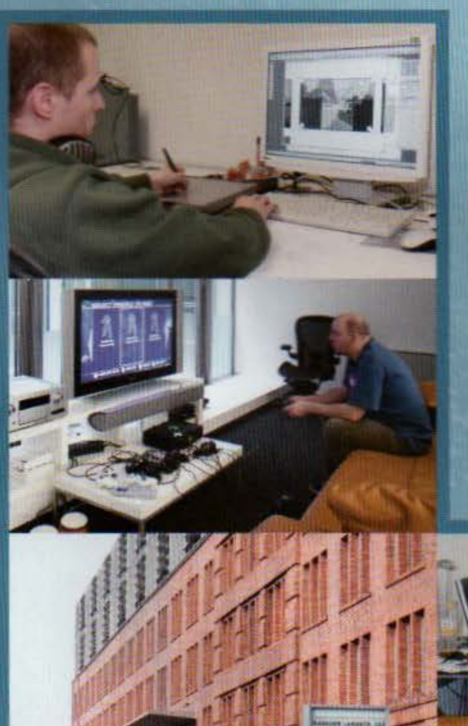
With *Crysis* fast approaching a feature-complete state, its creator speaks elusively when you ask what those features are. The contents of a third act in which aliens are unmasked and combat takes to the skies won't be made public until the public play it themselves. But in a quiet corner of the studio we're treated to an exclusive look – sans enemies – at the game beyond the green: the Ice Sphere, as it first appears.

Reassuringly for those with delicate tastes, *Crysis* is three games rolled into one, each with its own unique physics system and rule set, arranged into a traditional sci-fi storyline of investigation, disaster and resistance. The second of those sees the island around an alien landing site, hotly contested by US Delta and North Korean Army forces, frozen solid in a split second. The surprise: by the time it all happens you've seen the spacecraft interior already. The reveal: breathtaking, as you'd imagine.

How busy a set-piece it will be is unclear – Crytek is only now populating the level and wants its biggest enemies kept close to its chest. But evidently the entire game will be transformed. Incursion will turn to retreat, the deform-heavy environment will simply shatter, and the North Koreans, with their fragile limbs and dependence on gravity, will make way for aliens with better exoskeletons than yours. The numerous Matrix Sentinel toys dotted around the office are a worry, but Diemer assures us "they're there to remind people what we don't want to see."

Snow is falling, then, in myriad sizes and directions, while banks of volumetric fog buffet your concave visor and thicken in the mountain's pits and troughs. And you're running, eyes looking forwards to the treacherous rocks and back to the alien advance. There's a story section – one of many to exploit the gaps between fights – and at the glazed wall of the sphere is your escape route: a broken bridge and a transitional load. CryEngine 2's streaming code ensures that *Crysis* will never break during a level, but between them it has to. The upheaval of its physics, AI and video systems when entering or exiting the Ice Sphere, we're told, would simply be too much for anything without eight gigabytes of RAM.

As *Crysis* evolves from here, VTOL aircraft and helicopters will be flown, gravity boots will be worn and one by one the legacies of *Far Cry* will be stripped away in the name of progress. But when you're throwing gravity out of the equation, how do you retain a natural set of boundaries? Not invisible walls, surely. "It's difficult to guide the player without restricting them too much, but we're getting there," says Diemer. "The important thing for us is that it's





Right: creative director Cevat Yerli, lead designer Bernd Diemer and business director Avni Yerli. The 140-strong team at Crytek is so consumed with development duties that much of the new office remains sparsely decorated

consistent with the story. Even if it's a kind of soft boundary, like someone telling you to get back to the war zone in *Battlefield*, then that's something I'd personally accept. We have sharks attacking you in the water; we have other helicopters, things like that."

So complete are Crytek's designs for each of the game's three acts – an unsolicited glance at the walls reveals a grungy shipping yard, a vast circular chamber lit by an open ceiling and a wealth of military and alien paraphernalia – that it's easy to get ahead of yourself. That initial trip to the island interior, for example, is clearly twice the game *Far Cry* was, as proved by its most recent playable code.

A DX10 showcase at January's CES, the demo's quick timeline of events – an infiltration, a gunfight and a helicopter battle – is already a hot topic for online debate. The gradual fade in



Power Struggle remains the game's foremost multiplayer mode, with North Korean vehicle manufacture pitched against the nanosuits of the attacking Delta force. In DX10, unparalleled strategic depth is assured







of HUD, gun model and environment is unquestionably *Far Cry*-esque, a tsunami of green leaves and tree bark crashing through the monitor in layer upon layer upon layer. Though taken out of context for the demo, it's clear that at this point in the game you've punctured into one of many 'action bubbles', a road stretching around corners both behind and in front, towards forest and beach. Between them is a settlement of huts, a lookout post, patrolling guards and serviced vehicles, flanked by welcoming elevations rich in natural camouflage. Photorealism aside, then, it's business as usual.

And that's the deal with *Crysis*: you go into it without knowing quite what to expect, and come out knowing that you don't have to expect anything. If you want *Halo*, with its run-and-thwack combat and close encounters, then you can forget the nanosuit and hop in the nearest jeep, a finger reserved solely for the melee key. For *Crackdown* kicks, you just vault a hundred feet into a crowd of soldiers and become a whirlwind of airborne bodies. For *Metal Gear Solid*, creep to within breathing distance of the outermost guard and grab his throat with a camouflaged hand, using him as a human flak jacket if it all goes wrong. A (for

Creep to within breathing distance of the outermost guard and grab his throat, using him as a human flak jacket

But like Far *Cry* and *Far Cry* alone, a lot happens before you take your first step. Crytek likes a game in which you think rather than react, and thanks to *Crysis'* nanosuit there are plenty of options. Both mouse and keyboard can navigate the suit's petal menu, which manages upgrades to armour, speed, strength and stealth (known here as cloak). And keyboard navigation is as fast as you'd hope, fingers tripped up only by the need to cycle through the options for your modular rifle. The inevitable nano-energy bar is there to stop you bunny-hopping through levels with impunity, armour providing a default mode that could see you through the entire game should the need for authenticity grab you.

once) genuine FPS sandbox, *Crysis* feels like play where other games feel like work.

For a game that walks a tightrope across the uncanny valley it's also rather camp, the demo snipping punchy brass and bongo drums from a 70-minute score by the Seattle Philharmonic. Obviously you won't be in a position to play Bond – or Carver – for all of *Crysis*, but the opportunities are there. The North Koreans genuinely seek cover behind the objects you destroy, bounding when exposed and staying put when concealed, and while the action can be rusty from time to time – the strafing helicopter is as vulnerable to a fixed gun emplacement now as it would have been last





SOB STORY

"The most profound difference between the *Far Cry* story and the *Crysis* story," explains Diemer, "is that, on one hand, we have a lot of real writers working this time, and we tried to keep in mind that it's not an insular story like in *Far Cry* – you know, secret island, secret everything – but quite global. You have one superpower engaged with another, you have aliens and there are global implications. We put a lot of stuff in there to set up the franchise as a whole, so there are a lot of hints and mysterious goings on. We didn't want a story that explains everything, and we didn't want something that sets up the player as the bad ass hero from the start. At first you're just a soldier, and you interact with the people in your squad and the story characters. In combat there isn't much story going on because, really, no one cares."

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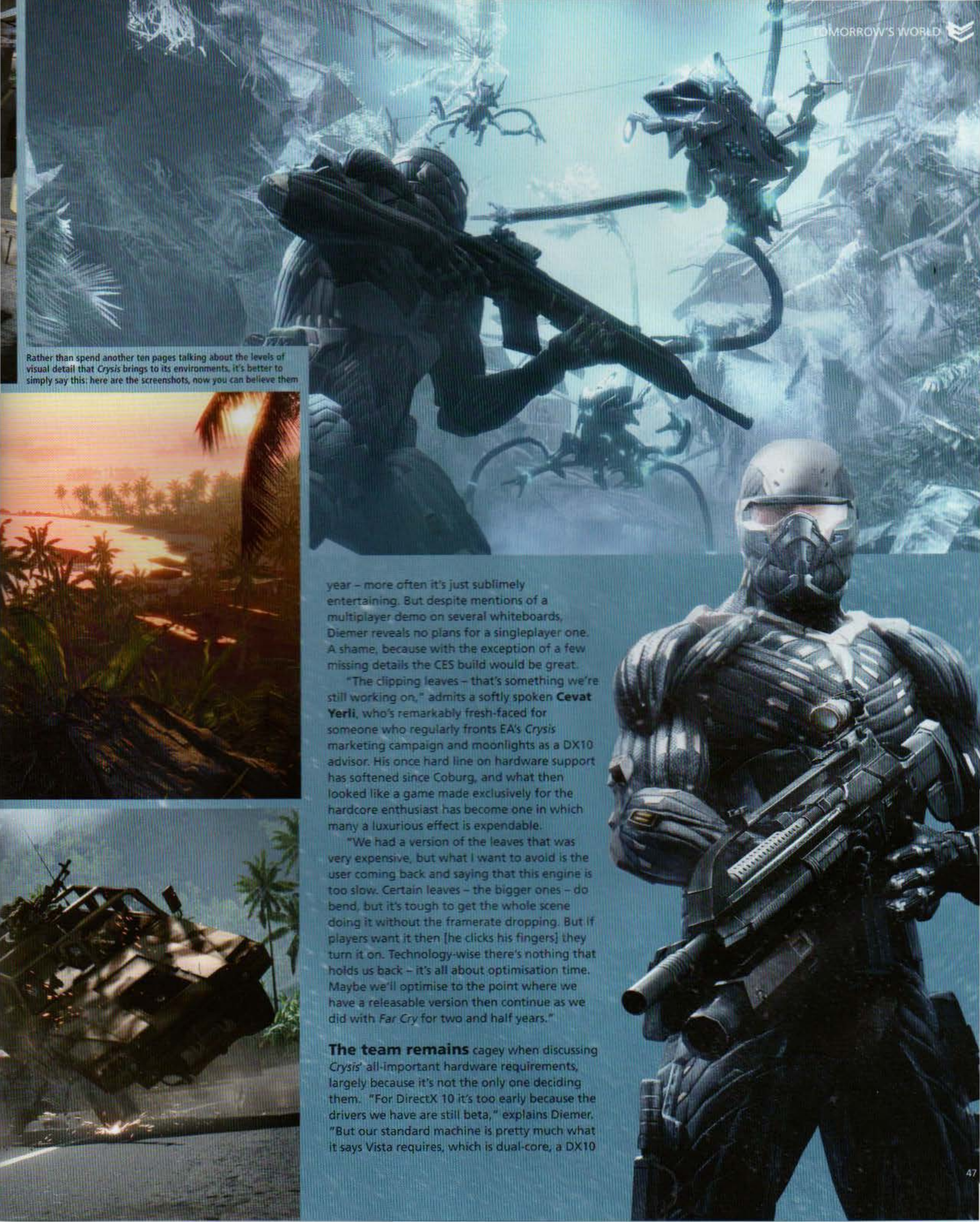
card – just one 8800 in our demo machines – and two gigabytes of RAM. As for optimising downwards, the rule of thumb we tell the R&D guys is high-spec *Far Cry* equals low-spec *Crysis*." Yerli agrees; but there's a mischievous old glint in his eye. "No matter what you have, we'll bring you down.

"If you have SLI DX10 with four gigs, we'll bring your PC down; not because we want to do that but because we want to invest in the future." There's a moment's pause, and he laughs. "Actually, maybe if you have SLI DX10 it'll be very difficult to bring your PC down. But there are profiles which we're not exposing

> "If you have SLI DX10 with four gigs, we'll bring your PC down because we want to invest in the future"

through the outer config which would otherwise make the high-end systems run like mediums. Users would say: 'What the fuck? I bought a new PC for this?' So two years later you'll be able to reinstall *Crysis*, hopefully loving it already for its core gameplay, and it'll look better. Games grow old, and that's something I want to avoid"

Ever the evangelist, he can speak for hours like this and always have one last thing to add. And you can't help but feel that *Crysis* is the same, hiding more in its later stages – still – than most games have in total. But today there's little time for talk of facial haemoglobin maps and the 10,000 procedurally-generated soldiers the



Rather than spend another ten pages talking about the levels of visual detail that *Crysis* brings to its environments, it's better to simply say this: here are the screenshots, now you can believe them

year – more often it's just sublimely entertaining. But despite mentions of a multiplayer demo on several whiteboards, Diemer reveals no plans for a singleplayer one. A shame, because with the exception of a few missing details the CES build would be great.

"The clipping leaves – that's something we're still working on," admits a softly spoken **Cevat Yerli**, who's remarkably fresh-faced for someone who regularly fronts EA's *Crysis* marketing campaign and moonlights as a DX10 advisor. His once hard line on hardware support has softened since Coburg, and what then looked like a game made exclusively for the hardcore enthusiast has become one in which many a luxurious effect is expendable.

"We had a version of the leaves that was very expensive, but what I want to avoid is the user coming back and saying that this engine is too slow. Certain leaves – the bigger ones – do bend, but it's tough to get the whole scene doing it without the framerate dropping. But if players want it then [he clicks his fingers] they turn it on. Technology-wise there's nothing that holds us back – it's all about optimisation time. Maybe we'll optimise to the point where we have a releasable version then continue as we did with *Far Cry* for two and half years."

The team remains cagey when discussing *Crysis*' all-important hardware requirements, largely because it's not the only one deciding them. "For DirectX 10 it's too early because the drivers we have are still beta," explains Diemer. "But our standard machine is pretty much what it says Vista requires, which is dual-core, a DX10



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synchronise all these systems in online play, however, it adds a much more intellectual level with choices you've never had before. The perceived difference will be much greater than in DX10 singleplayer."

With all the talk of multiplayer servers split between DirectX versions, hidden detail settings and modding tools available from release, *Crysis* is as good a PC champion as any, simply because it's so defiantly PC-centric for a game with such wide appeal. Not since *Quake II* has the industry marched so strictly to the beat of a single drum, hardware, software and everything in between under its apparent influence. The most popular question, then, becomes one of the most interesting: is this game *really* a PC exclusive?

"It's PC only. We're totally, absolutely focused on PC," says Diemer. "It's not that we haven't thought about it. And it's public knowledge that CryEngine runs on Xbox 360 and PS3. But until we're done with the PC version we don't even think about what to do next. That's where our competence comes from – we're a PC company. And with all these initiatives by Microsoft that's the place I want to be; it's where it's happening at the moment."

And if, for the sake of a port, EA wanted to outsource the game to a thirdparty? He physically recoils. "We spent so long developing the IP that I think no matter what happens we'd be *really* closely involved with that. It's our baby that we've been working on for the last three or four years, and we have big expectations for the whole franchise. It's why we went to all the trouble and put a lot of money into developing this; it's not just the one game. *Far Cry* was different – it was the first project we attempted as a company, we made errors and we had to make compromises. But this time we're being more logical. Hopefully, this time, we're doing it better."

game will never need. So he makes the closing minutes count.

"DX10 and multiplayer gaming is going to be very, very big," he says, flatly. "It *will* make a gameplay difference. You'll get battle dust that hangs in the air, vegetation bending and dense grass synchronised across all PCs. For the last five years, from DX7 to DX9, multiplayer gaming hasn't changed. But through DX10, Vista and the average min-spec PC required to run it, we can introduce a new set of mechanics online. I know the initial numbers playing will be very few, but I also know we can convince them.

"For example, a human brain knows if a guy is walking through the grass, but getting AI to recognise it is very difficult. A human can see the dust in the air and know there was a battle there, or interpret from the amount of dust how long ago it was. A human can see a shadow poking out from behind a corner and know to be careful, but AI won't at any time in the near future because it requires pixel and image processing beyond the AI brain. If you

There's surprisingly little you can say about the DX10 difference – you really do have to see it for yourself. Richer, denser, and busier visual effects and environments are the apparent heart of it



Making history

How the men behind Dark Messiah and City 17 are planning to invent a new kind of gaming, rebuild Paris, and abolish the Renaissance

The phrase 'show, don't tell' might be a familiar principle to authors of written fiction. But, despite videogames' fundamentally visual nature, their creators still seem uneasy with this delicate art.

Half-Life 2, though, was a game that grasped it firmly. Just think of Gordon Freeman's walk from the train station into the square outside at the game's outset. That ten-second walk wordlessly tells 100 years of the city's history through its architecture – a history of building and razing, hope and despair.

To **Viktor Antonov** – designer of *Half-Life 2*'s City 17, and now two visions of modern Paris in Arkane's *The Crossing* – showing is everything to game fiction. So



TITLE: **THE CROSSING**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **ARKANE**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **TBA**

much so, in fact, that he's co-writing *The Crossing's* story.

Set in parallel universes – one a riot-stricken chaos of inner-city concrete housing projects, the other a militaristic Gothic megalopolis ruled over by the Knights Templar – *The Crossing* is a firstperson shooter that aims to radically bridge the separation between singleplayer and multiplayer games by being both simultaneously.

"The two main motives that drove us were that AI will never match the emotion that a real human player can provide," says **Raphaël Colantonio**, Antonov's co-writer and Arkane's CEO. "The other was that in current multiplayer games there's no meaning. You just play them for the sake of fragging." So *The Crossing's* solution is to give AI roles to human players, providing both worthy opponents to fight against and reason for fragging by situating conflict in the context of the game's story.

Players approach *The Crossing* as either story players or soldier players. The story players progress through the game's maps in a linear fashion, following its narrative, just like any singleplayer game. Soldier players play the part of their adversaries and allies on each map, as if they were other players in a multiplayer match. Arkane calls the concept 'crossplayer', which is a reference to the way both types of player will cross paths.

The Crossing's imaginings of Paris therefore have to simultaneously provide a linear, paced experience and flowing, open gunplay between many players with different motivations. And they also need to tell a tight and compelling story that will pin the potentially sprawling structure together.

Antonov's relationship with game writing began with *Half-Life 2*, during which he collaborated closely with its writer, Marc Laidlaw. "Every time you do a new world you have to come up with a back-story for a design to be successful," says Antonov. "He'd look at a drawing and get inspired and write something into the story and the other way around. It's the natural step in the design process."



"I DON'T SEE WHY GAMES SHOULD BE SO DETACHED AND TAKE PLACE ONLY IN ABSTRACT ALIEN WORLDS"

His belief in a stronger relationship between art direction and story has come from a long frustration as a visual designer, having studied industrial design, been a designer on the recent French animation feature film, Renaissance, and worked on games including *Kingpin* and Arkane's own *Dark Messiah*. "Many times I was tasked just to make something look good-looking when there's no logic or consistency, which is very often the case in game stories," he says.

When Colantonio first approached Antonov with *The Crossing's* concept, he was considering a setting like New York or Los Angeles, but Antonov wanted to try somewhere different. They settled on Paris for its links to the Templars and for the freshness of depicting its impoverished suburbs. "For a long time I wanted to tell a story about the Paris hard–boiled ghettos because they are such intense locations and they are relatively unused in fiction and especially sci-fi," says Antonov.

It was during pre-production of the game that the 2005 riots broke out in the city, and they seemed to confirm a connection between their fictional idea and the city's gritty reality. "I remember Viktor and I called each other and we said: 'Hey, isn't this amazing – it's exactly as in our story'," says Colantonio. "We really want to do something very believable, even if part of the location is our world and the other is imaginary."

Despite the fact that the Paris suburbs are a novelty, Antonov believes the creative risk with setting *Half-Life 2* in a central European city was much higher because Paris is so well known. It's apparent that he and Colantonio have enjoyed subverting its clichéd cafes-and-Louvre tourist identity. Antonov's Paris ghetto is a place of pitilessly Modernist social housing blocks featuring careful authentic details to make the city look real and lived-in, and not just built for the game. "There are orange decorations on some of the projects; naively painted suns to make the suburbs a happier place," he says of the real city. "That's very specific to France because of the socialist 1970s era." By placing similarly colourful



Murky water effects add to the atmosphere of the slum areas



The position of the sun in a scene is important to Antonov, who uses it to blind or direct the player, as well as simply to provide visual spectacle

wall paintings in *The Crossing's* urban hell he has strengthened its authenticity, also creating a little visual respite from the relentlessly grey concrete and sky, as well as a little grotesque irony for the player.

Antonov's belief in the importance of using realism in games is one of the big reasons Colantonio wanted to work with him. "He doesn't want to go for magic stuff, or things like that. For this particular game it's exactly what we wanted, somewhere believable where everything that's designed feels like it has arisen to be there, has a meaning," he says.

"In a real-looking world, everything matters much more than in a completely abstract world where everything around you looks like a toy," says Antonov. The strategy also enables truly otherworldly things to stand out all the better, as did the Citadel, which towers over the recognisable realism of City 17 in more than just height. "All arts are a reflection of reality," Antonov goes on to say. "I don't see why games should be so detached and take place only in abstract alien worlds. One of my dreams is that games become a recognised art form like film, music or photography."

Set in the Île de la Cité, *The Crossing's* story follows a highly trained anti-terrorist soldier in a Paris in which the government has been toppled and chaos reigns. About a quarter of the way into the game's story, he enters a church and exits into a parallel version of Paris. Here, Colantonio and Antonov have supposed that the Knights Templar weren't disbanded in the 14th century. Instead, they rose to take over France as a despotic, warring Crusader nation.

In this alternative Paris of towering limestone spires, warrens of dark, arched passageways and steam-enveloped machinery – a style that Antonov terms mega-Gothic – the Renaissance hasn't happened. "It was an amazing exercise because almost all values in modern western civilisation are based on a Greco-Roman model revived during the Renaissance. The architecture in Paris is almost entirely neoclassical and has very little variety in style." He took Gothic





Bulgarian-born Antonov's (left) credits stretch as far back as 1997's *Redneck Rampage*, while Colantonio (above) worked on 1994's *Theme Park* and *FIFA* for EA



Gothic arches and the cross of the Knights Templar (left) identify the alternative Paris

architectural themes and evolved them into a modern style – with less ornament and cleaner shapes. To emphasise this he exchanged wood for metal to retain a Gothic appearance without it being crumbling and organic.

Antonov also wanted the architecture of this Gothic Paris to tell stories about the culture: its interest in building on a monumental scale has given it the ability to construct enormous structures, but its warring nature has led to a shortage of metal for constructing much of that kind of architecture, a detail Antonov took from the effects of WWI on architectural history. While it has electricity, much power derives from steam.

Substituting such careful environmental detail for lengthy verbal explanation exposes Antonov's 'show, don't tell' approach to game art direction. "The game world is a powerful tool for providing information about the back-story," he says. "Architecture, props, and level of decay tell us a lot about the what happened before the player came. This makes the narration subtler, sophisticated and replaces flat expositions and voiceovers."

Aside from architectural details, Antonov also draws on a wide range of tricks to elicit more instinctive and emotional reaction from players from the game environment, all rules developed in other visual arts such as photography, classical relief painting and illustration. Of these, lighting contrast is Antonov's main tool. Backlighting, for instance, can create a dramatic and unsettling sense of the unknown: "That's why in *Half-Life 2* when you go out of the train station you have the sun behind the building in front and long shadows cast your way," he says. "You feel this presence of something heavy in front of you."

Antonov begins sketching every environment out in light first, grouping light and dark in large masses and taking note of how it appears in full, instead of concentrating on detail. "The method comes from traditional painting and photography, and it's often overlooked in games," he says. By contrasting the element of the environment that Antonov wants the player to notice by lighting it or placing it in shadow, he's able to make a distinct and legible image that points the way for action or emotional response.

"The trickiest thing about games is that you can't control the image – you end up having to control ten images, 360 degrees around you," Antonov concedes. In a linear, story-driven game, the problem is mitigated by the fact that he can anticipate the path a player will take through the space. He can then create carefully composed vistas that relate to what's happening in the storyline next. "Everything starts with planning the player's experience from the beginning to the end, and defining the key moments or points, which isn't very different to the big establishing shots in film," he says.

Most of the game will be set in Templar Paris, though the player will see some of the







"THE KNIGHTS HAVE TO BECOME EXPOSED AND START SWINGING AROUND LIKE SPIDER-MAN"

same locations in both cities for comparison. The decision enables Antonov to control the environment much more than the wide streets and square blocks of the ghetto Paris. The organic and unpredictable street plan follows the curve of the river, instead of the real Paris' radiating mid-19th century street plan of broad boulevards, so he can block player access and frame vistas more naturally.

Templar Paris' lofty spires and roofs also add a vertical element to the city, accessed via grappling hooks by soldier players playing as Templar knights. It's a feature that Colantonio is excited about: "This way we can mix vertical spaces with more horizontal ones, so that the soldiers have different tools to move around compared to the story players. That brings some interesting play because the knights have to become exposed and start swinging around like Spider-Man in order to get at their targets."

Colantonio is aiming for maps to feature ten players at most – a modest number by today's standards. "We want a more intimate experience," he says. "Honestly, whenever I play a game with 64 or 32 players it's just a big mess for me. Tactics are dead. You spawn and you die. Where's the fun in that?"

The Crossing will feature two types of map – 60 per cent of the game will be played out in linear 'story' levels, with soldier players taking the place of specific enemies and allies. The soldier players, who are lighter armed and less powerful than story players, are given mini challenges according to the role they've taken, and will achieve ranking rewards. They can also switch control between enemies – Colantonio uses the analogy of Agent Smith in The Matrix.

The rest of the maps are more open 'skirmish' levels, which act much like any normal multiplayer map for soldier players to compete in until the server drops story players in. The game pauses to run down objectives for each player and the map, sometimes opening new sections according to the story, and it then plays out until the story players have succeeded in meeting their objectives and move on to the next map in the game's narrative. For the soldier players the action continues among themselves again.

Colantonio hopes that the experience for both types of player will be entirely different but equally rewarding – the key, he says, is that their powers differ. The soldier players will have fun killing each other, or working together to bring down a powerful story player. The story players will enjoy their sense of might – Colantonio says that story characters will have different abilities, similar to the three types of character in *Aliens Vs Predator* – which will enable them to use a series of varied and unique tactics to help them match the number of opponents they meet. And for those that would rather the game remain closer to its oneplayer shooter roots, the whole game can be played offline or with the only other human playing co-operatively.

If Arkane is able to pull off the challenging act of balancing the disparate playing styles and ways players will approach the game, it will likely be Antonov's visions of Paris that will be a fundamental part of its success. Giving context and contrast, informing feelings and actions, his cities must mutely govern *The Crossing*'s players while the barrier between single and multiplayer gaming is being broken around them. All through showing, not telling.

Templar Paris' reliance on steam for power has led to a smoggy look to the rooftops



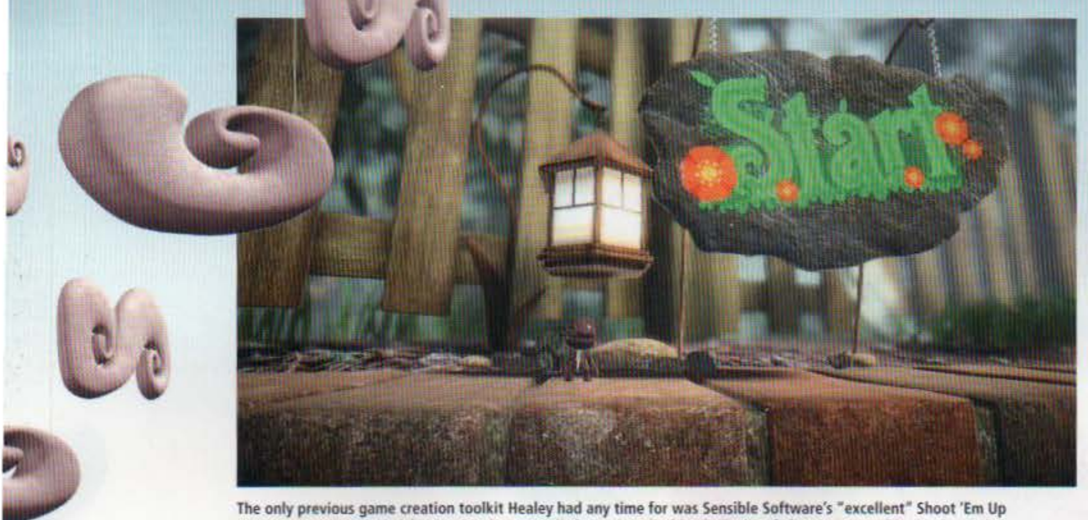


A Little Big Idea

A small team in Guildford is making one of PS3's biggest games – and so will you be

Let's start with the little. In this game from Media Molecule, which at the time of writing is so new it doesn't even have a title, you can make your button-eyed, hemp-skinned, zip-fronted little avatar run, jump… and act. The D-pad selects facial expressions: grin, grimace and frown. The right stick waves its arms around together, but hold down L2 and R2 and the left and right sticks can move them independently. And, in a simple stroke of genius, tilting the Sixaxis controller moves its head. You can assume attitudes, look at things in the game world, dance; if you wear a frown and tilt your head forwards, you'll move in a dejected shuffle.

TITLE: **TBC**
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **MEDIA MOLECULE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**



The only previous game creation toolkit Healey had any time for was Sensible Software's "excellent" Shoot 'Em Up Construction Kit, but arriving in 1987 it came a little too late for him: he'd already learned assembler by that point

It's an inspired use of the Sixaxis that cleverly exploits its dual nature, turning it into an effortless combination of game controller and puppeteer's rod. It makes such instinctive sense that within a minute of picking it up, you feel that this is the game the controller has been waiting for. And then when someone explains the whole concept to you, you realise that this cute, simple little game – being made in Guildford by Media Molecule, a tiny team of less than 20 souls – could be a huge, defining release for Sony. No less than the game the PS3 has been waiting for.

This cute, simple little game could be a huge, defining release for Sony. No less than the game the PS3 has been waiting for

So let's move on to the big things. In the most basic terms the game is a side-on multiplayer platformer with a knockabout physics engine and a distinctive visual style: a cross between *LocoRoco*, *Four Swords Adventures*, and the accidental hit that first caused Media Molecule to come into being: *Rag Doll Kung Fu*. But it's also something far more significant than that, something that caused Sony's Worldwide Studios to snap it up as a firstparty PS3 exclusive when Media Molecule presented the game a year ago. It's a creative tool.

And it doesn't simply have a level editor – it *is* one, and your character is the game's star and designer rolled into one. A button press brings up a thought-bubble menu system, and a cursor that's tethered to your character by a luminous colour-coded kite string. With this you can place objects in the world, decide their physical properties, move them, reshape them, create new ones from scratch, apply stickers, paint pictures, add sound, import photos, design costumes. You can work with a blank slate or from a template, and there's a scale of creativity from arranging ready-made components to designing your own. Media Molecule is calling this system Poppet, for no particular reason. (Creative director **Mark Healey**, Media Molecule's lunatic lynchpin, says he's been trying to reverse-engineer an acronym for it, but with limited success.)

Then Sony steps in and provides, in the form of the PlayStation Network, a platform for sharing your creations with friends and the game's entire userbase. **Pete Smith**, senior producer at Sony's Studio Liverpool which is overseeing the game, is quick to name-check the star sites of the so-called web 2.0 phenomenon as inspirations: YouTube, MySpace, Flickr. The argument goes that the current climate is exactly right for creative gaming to explode past the technical, hobbyist PC mod community into a genuinely massmarket pursuit, and that PS3, PSN and this game are the products to make it happen.

"There is something very empowering about creating something, and sharing it with

This section is crossed by dragging the soft, cushion-like blocks out of the way and causing a happy, tumbling landslide; the yellow blobs of foam explode on contact with a satisfying pop

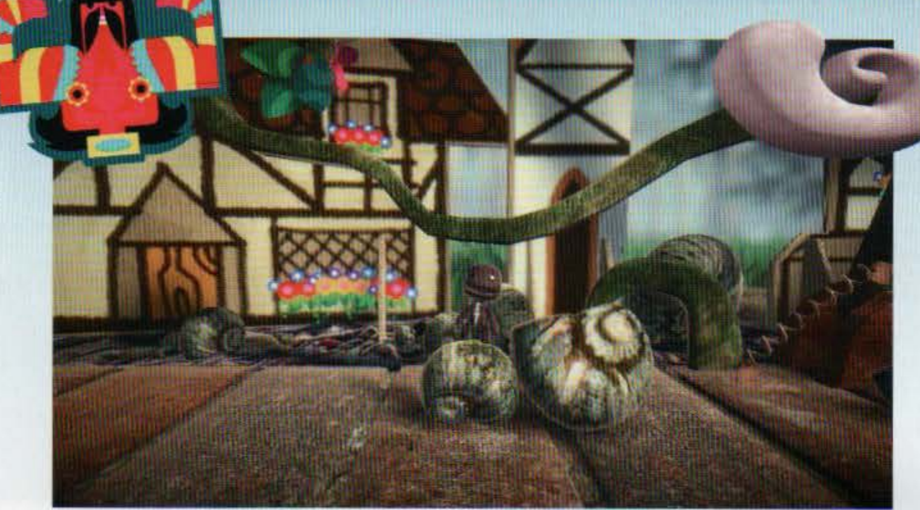
The Poppet creative interface hasn't been finalised yet, but is already slick and approachable, influenced by Sony's media bar

other people, and them enjoying it," says Healey. "During the development process, I often get what I call a 'power gush' – it's this kind of rush of excitement from making a feature that you know is going to make people laugh, or is groundbreaking in some way. It's quite a physical thing that has me pacing up and down, trembling and making excited ape noises. So the reason I have for wanting to make this game is to bring the 'power gush' sensation to those that know they have a great imagination, but don't have the time or ability to learn all the complicated stuff you need to learn to make a game. And what with MySpace, YouTube and so on the time just feels right. Maybe it's something to do with the Age of Aquarius," he adds, and it's impossible to tell if he's being serious.

Having decided to make a creative game, the first, and hardest, step Media Molecule had to make was to create both an interface and environment that would encourage any and every player to mess around. Two key decisions were taken that distinguish this particular title from any previous content creation tool: the editor and the game had to be seamlessly integrated, and they had to allow players to create together, in realtime.

"A map editor in a game isn't a new thing at all, but traditionally they are either really complicated and techy, or very limited in what you can actually do with them," says Healey. "We wanted to give people the ability to sit back in a sofa, use a joypad, and just make wacky stuff, and most importantly, be able to do it co-operatively – either with other friends on the same sofa, or online. Co-operative creativity, or jamming, was one of our mantras."

To make the transition to creative gaming as smooth as possible for the player, Media Molecule is carefully folding creative elements into the controlled environment of the levels they're creating for the game themselves, so that "as a by-product of playing it, you find yourself making stuff," in the words of technical director **Alex Evans**. "It was important that the editing tools form part of the actual gameplay from the start, so for example you might have to use the painting or other creative tools to 'beat' a character in the game." Healey suggests building a bridge to cross a gap, or "making a fully working vehicle and steaming down a huge slope. We do realise that not everyone will want to spend time making a whole level. Some people might only want to customise what their character looks like, for example, or maybe just make a mad creature, and share it with friends."



Although the game is uproariously entertaining and tactile to play, the feel and timing of the controls sometimes seem fractionally off: this might be down to no more than a few missing sound effects, an essential part of movement feedback

The problem cuts both ways, of course: as well as designing simple creative tools that would blend in to the game, they had to come up with a solid, fun game that would make sense of the tools. On this level, the game is already a total, riotous success.

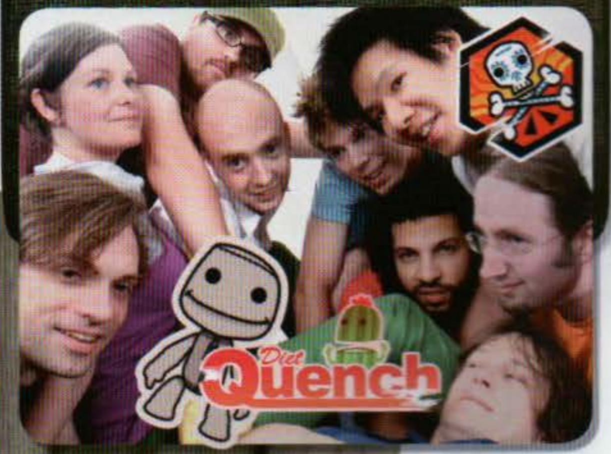
In the shot above, you'd jump into the screen and onto the block behind you by pushing up on the left stick, but such movement is only possible when the option is there; normally it's left and right only

Molecular biology

Media Molecule was formed by Lionhead employees Healey, Evans and Smith in late 2005, around the same time that Healey's independently-made, mouse-controlled puppet fighter *Rag Doll Kung Fu* was commercially released over Valve's Steam distribution service. But they are far from wanting to distance themselves from their former employer. "I learnt everything I know about games at Bullfrog and Lionhead, and Peter Molyneux was very supportive of us when we first left," says Evans. "The games we worked on there – PC games – were great at that more open-ended, free-roaming and emergent gameplay. I really want to translate some of that to a console game."

"*Rag Doll Kung Fu* was my first experience of dealing with publishers first hand – so it almost became a mini crash-course in everything you need to know about making a game, from concept through to localisation," continues Healey. Their working methods might be unorthodox, but Sony has been receptive. "We stick to our guns about the way we do things so that we can still be creative and a 'family' making a game we all love, while trying to deliver polished stuff on time," says Evans. "We delivered our first few milestones by walking round the office with a DV camera, interviewing people and pointing it at the screen."

Healey's belief in his team is total, and defiant. "We are very good at implementing wacky ideas. Having original ideas isn't that hard really, but turning them into something on screen takes skilful craftsmanship. And we really do have a talented team – that might sound big headed, but I believe it is true."





There aren't any camera controls in the current build, although it zooms in and out automatically according to players' distance from each other, or if Poppet is engaged. The game is entirely free of a HUD, reinforcing the 'cartoon verite' look

In a brief but utterly delightful hands-on session, we romp with Healey, Evans and Smith (avatars dressed as Evel Knievel, a '30s showgirl and a snake, plus one naked but for hastily applied pink deely boppers) through one of Media Molecule's own levels. It's essentially a straightforward, A-to-B, left-to-right platforming assault course that seems to have been constructed out of sack-cloth, cardboard, fruit, kitchen utensils, snail shells, a nursery mobile and some sticky-back plastic. Everything in the world behaves with very believable physical properties (although as Smith points out, sometimes the wrong ones – like a tree made of sponge and cloth, for example). By holding down R1, the characters can be made to grab onto and manipulate any object in the world (including each other) with their stretchy, elastic arms.

The physics is integral to the gameplay, because it's fun on a fundamental level, and because experimenting with the physical behaviours of various objects is an easy and entertaining route to DIY game design, with plenty of opportunities for emergent play. The tiny mannequins balance on oranges, leap off spring-loaded levers, launch themselves from spinning cogs, dangle from bungee cords, use tiny tethered jet-packs to give each other airlifts, push skateboards down slopes and hang on for dear life. They generally strike a similar balance between co-operation and good-natured, slapstick squabbling to *Four Swords*, only in a much more free-form environment; and though there is a cap of four players per PS3, that number will be higher online. There's some gentle puzzling and occasionally a challenge of dexterity, but mostly the fun comes from the pure tactile pleasure of interaction, and that is abundant. It's a game that equals *Katamari Damacy* for

The skateboard jump is such a highlight that we fully expect an entire subculture to evolve around pushing elaborately-designed aerial vehicles off ramps and watching what they do



animation and the games it plays with scale and effects give it an innocent, nostalgic quality that's frankly almost moving.

"We always wanted to make it feel like someone had actually made a real set, and then filmed it with a camera, so old kids' programmes like Button Moon, Chorlton and the Wheelies and so on had a big influence," reveals Healey. "The idea of using craft materials was just an obvious one when we thought about user-created content."

"As the engine programmer I got fixated on making the game look like someone had taken a camcorder and filmed this wonderful small world coming to life," adds Evans. "So I concentrated on techniques that are normally associated with realistic games rather than toon games – really high quality motion blur, depth of field, colour correction. I think it's quite refreshing to see such a strongly stylised art style rendered in a realistic way."

The great unknown is exactly how content-sharing is going to work, and what the full extent of its network capabilities will be. Sony is tight-lipped at the moment, refusing to answer most questions on

Expect to be able to share your creations with friends and publish them for the whole PlayStation community to enjoy



The current version of the game's front end is a perfect blend of brand identities: Sony's cool consumer electronics restraint and Media Molecule's anarchic handicraft. This is certainly one game that deserves to get its own bespoke social network

specifics, but Smith promises they will attempt to wring every drop of functionality they can out of PSN for this title. If you can imagine it, they're probably going to try and do it.

So, expect to be able to share your creations with friends and publish them for the whole PlayStation community to enjoy; expect to see comments and feedback on your work, and charts that track the popularity of user-made levels. There is very likely to be ongoing content support from Media Molecule too, be it in the form of new levels, item sets or themes. It seems likely the game will need its own web-style interface to handle what ought, if all goes well, to be a rapidly expanding social network.

It won't just be whole levels you can share, but also level components; in a rare nugget of detail, Smith hints at quite sophisticated powers of distribution for creators. "We plan to allow creators to decide which objects and images they would be happy for other users to take out of their level. It may be that you have to complete a task or the whole level to win the object. We expect people to spend a long time creating cool items, and those that do will most likely make it a challenge to get it."

The two biggest unknowns are payment and censorship. While it will be sold as a regular boxed game there's no word on whether there'll be a fee, or any kind of microtransaction payments associated with continued use online. It's possible Sony will choose to charge for its own content downloads, but how about those created by players? Surely they must to be free to access, but Sony won't confirm it.

Mario and *Katamari*'s Prince are impersonated above: watch Media Molecule's introductory videos carefully and you'll see clips of both their games

The 'creations' menu suggests it's currently possible to take stills but not video; machinima fans may need to find another solution



There's no word either of a submission process for making your own levels freely available online, and this is an area in which Sony will have to tread very carefully indeed. There's plenty of scope for copyright infringement and unsuitable material – remaking a level of *Super Mario Bros*, say, and pasting pornographic images all over it. But how to introduce appropriate censorship measures without strangling the freedom of speech and social commentary that is the lifeblood of most online creative communities? Not to mention sending running costs and red tape through the roof. These are difficult questions for Sony and Media Molecule to answer in the time (as yet unspecified in length) before release.

But for all that they'll make a huge difference, they're secondary concerns, and largely administrative. Get bogged down in them and you'll lose sight of what an extraordinary, life-affirming proposition this is. It's an immensely likable game, gorgeous to behold, instantly rewarding to play and tinker with; making it possible for players to be creative is one thing, but making it fun is quite another, and with smart decisions and a gleeful spirit, Media Molecule has already succeeded at both.

Sony is not alone in wanting to build a portal for user-created content on a console, but Microsoft's answer – built around XNA – is academic and technical, while Sony has found one that's accessible to everyone, and turns game creation into a game itself. This game will sit in Sony's portfolio alongside the likes of *PaRappa* and *Ico*, *SingStar* and EyeToy; like them, it's fuelled by a belief that a small team with an indie attitude can still change the way games are made and played. "Although we grew out of the *Rag Doll* team, our ambition for this has always been a 'triple-A monster', as Mark calls it," says Evans. "So we're trying to see if we can take this madly ambitious idea and realise it as a defining PS3 title." After all the dark warnings about this generation's content crisis, how refreshing to find such conviction that little games can still be big things.

Orange segment

As an illustration of how simple it is to construct entertaining, emergent gameplay in this physical world, Media Molecule shows us a solution to the most basic platforming problem – a ledge too high to jump to. An orange and a football have been placed before it. You can drag the orange next to the football with a friend's help, and jump from one to the other; or jump on the orange, face backwards and 'walk' it over; or push it until it's rolling, grab hold and let go, using the centrifugal force to hurtle you over the football to your destination. In essence, the physics engine does half the work of game design for you, and prioritises experimentation over finesse.

The backyard setting of the level we've seen is really a perfect summation of the game's 'little world come to life' conceit. While it recalls the visual wit of *Micro Machines*, the astounding technical and artistic treatment catapults it up to another level entirely





Skin trade

You can be anything you want, as long as it's a male, muscled soldier Why is the crucial role of avatars so often limited and misunderstood?

If it's hard being Marcus Fenix, it's not because of the situation he finds himself in. It's not hard because war is hell, his world is in ruins and all he wants is an end to the slaughter and an evening in with a cold beer. No, it's hard because Marcus Fenix is a 300-pound cliché whose grizzled chops and sports-metal beard identify him as the kind of person you'd inch away from at bus stops. Fenix is a lumbering, vapid bore, and if you want to play *Gears Of War*, you have to be one too.

All gamers are familiar with that inward, wincing refrain: 'Do I really have to be him?' You could call it the Fenix Quandary. Or the Fisher Quandary. Or the Payne Quandary. By and large, a quick scan of any game shelf will give you a couple of comic animals, a few cybervixens and an awful lot of soldiers. Imagine going to the cinema to be told that there are 15 films on release, but 12 of them star Steven Seagal: that's the situation games are in. Avatars are in crisis, and with more titles opting out and providing not characters but a handful of sliders, haircuts and customisable skins, somebody needs to formulate a more sophisticated approach urgently. But to do that, they'll need to provide answers to a few awkward questions: What do avatars truly mean to players? What separates the good designs from the bad? And why is our understanding of the player's ongoing relationship with their avatar still so rudimentary?

Inevitably, the importance of the avatar comes down to what people look for in games. For many players, the appeal can be summed up as 'life, without the drowning': videogames put them in situations that would be impossible to explore in the real world. At its simplest, this engagement with pure immediate sensation only requires the most basic of avatars – a marker in the game's world that's structurally necessary yet emotionally unimportant, like the blinking cursor in a Word document.

Yet games can answer another more complex impulse, and in this case the role of the avatar is absolutely crucial. When poring over the screenshots of a new title,

Illustration: Jacey

apart from gauging the genre or assessing how pretty the game will be, aren't we asking – even in FPSes – 'who do I get to be?' Games allow their players to experiment with identity. Whether it's wish fulfilment or just curiosity, avatars bring up the uncomfortable question of how much of gaming involves pretending, like children do, that you're actually somebody else. That's why avatars are at the centre of the industry's continuing emphasis on the criminally child-specific virtue of imagination.



Does a firstperson game like *Deus Ex* lead to any less identification with your avatar than one that can switch to thirdperson, such as *Oblivion*?

Harvey Smith, the lead designer on *Deus Ex* and now creative director at Midway Studios Austin, has given the subject a lot of thought and delivered speeches on avatar psychology around the world. He agrees that the avatar is a powerful springboard for the imagination. "We're tapping into identity play – which archetype are you and which one are you not? We present the archetypes and then you gravitate towards them based on the stuff already in your own head."

And that clearly won't be the same stuff for everybody. The avatar's importance is complicated by the conflicting imaginative impulses different players bring to the game: some want an avatar that will allow them to escape into a fully-formed fantasy role, others require a blank space on which to project their own identity.

It's catering for these needs – or choosing between them – that breaks avatars down into two basic categories: those that are fixed, presented to the player as a detailed role to play, and those that can be customised.

Both choices can seriously affect the player-avatar relationship, and tip the balance as to whether the avatar is just someone the player controls, or someone the player actually becomes. Fixed characters emerge from the impulse to tell complex stories. In literature and film, narrative and character are tailor-made for each other, locked in a relationship that simply cannot be pulled apart. Yet in games, giving the player an avatar with an established personality is a dangerous proposition – not only can it control the way they'll play, it also limits the size of the audience who will feel any initial connection.

City Of Heroes

The customisation options available in conjunction with the MM aspect of MMOGs often violate one of the core principles of game design: the main character is meant to be special. You could call it the *City Of Heroes* Paradox, online's version of the Fenix Quandary. The biggest challenge for MMOGs is dealing with the fact that all players are equally (un)important. When everyone in *WOW* can customise themselves into an extreme creation, it's harder to mark yourself out in the crowd. The trade-off is that, offline, avatars are a bit like hotel rooms: playing Gordon Freeman, or Mario, you're sharing the character with a large audience of others who will have near-identical experiences. Online, though, you have the chance to make something no one else will use. Strange, then, that few choose to use their own names online.

That's why many games leave the avatar deliberately vague. "The Japanese have a term called 'masking'," explains Smith. "It's basically a generic cartoon the player can project his identity on to. In some anime, the hero is drawn with very few lines, and the villain is drawn with lots and lots of lines – the hero is very easy to project onto, he's like an empty vessel, and the antagonist is a very distinctly created character."

So the more generic and under-imagined an avatar is, the smaller the chance they'll exclude a potential audience. It's the reasoning behind Gordon Freeman's silence, or the Master Chief's helmet. Nintendo is the master of manipulating this blank-slate approach. Mario is hardly a figure of wish fulfilment: his appeal lies in the world he lets you explore. Nintendo stars are often shells, paint-thin applications whose job is to

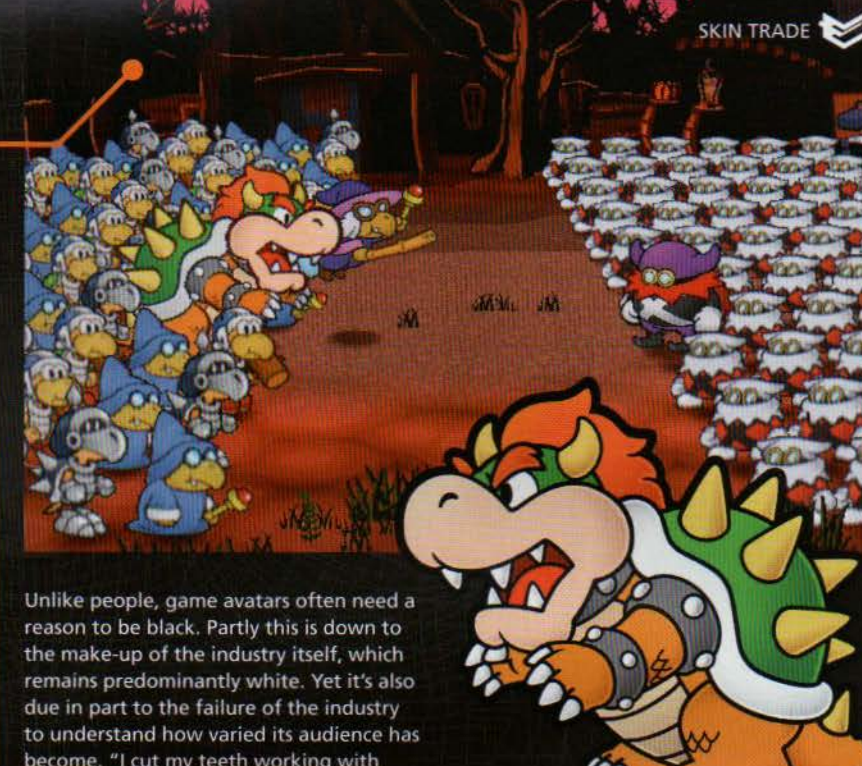


While the Unreal Engine 3 added much to Marcus Fenix's rugged exterior, we can't help but feel he'd be just as much of a clichéd lump if he were cel-shaded

provide a carefree centre for the simply-plotted adventures. The games that tried to push the story further, such as *Luigi's Mansion* and *Super Mario Sunshine*, have been controversial – and the most convincing *Mario* games of the last generation, the RPGs, have worked because they revel in and parody that blankness at the character's heart.

Taking this blank-slate proposal to the extreme might lead you to the conclusion that Pac-Man, the universal ambassador for the entire industry, may also be one of its best examples of avatar design. Pac-Man couldn't get more basic, suggesting nothing more complicated than boundless appetite. Certainly, the colours and novelty and the switch-around chase mechanic had a lot to do with the game's success, but having an avatar as universally applicable as Pac-Man probably didn't hurt. Tellingly, subsequent elaborations on the design only dilute it – arms and legs, as in some of the recent platformers, diminish the appeal because they turn him from an idea into a strange creature – and people don't identify with strange creatures the way they will identify with ideas.

Even so, whether designers opt for something generic or more specific, the scope of fixed characters is depressingly small. Designers need to appeal to the widest possible audience, and the results are often a bland pudding that offends nobody but doesn't excite anybody either. A regular allegation made against the games industry is that most of the avatars are white males, and the character's race and gender, when different from the norm, often have a bearing on the story.



The *Mario RPG* series makes a number of sly digs at a mascot better known for jumping than personality, while retaining the charm that made Mario a hit

Lara Croft

Much of the success of *Tomb Raider* is pinned on the 11th-hour switch from male to female protagonist. Whilst this is certainly true, the appeal of Lara remains all-too-often misunderstood. Lara's not a great character because she's sexy, but because she was different – a step away from what action gamers were used to getting at the time. And it's perhaps her aloofness rather than her appearance that is the key to her sticking power: of all the thirdperson avatars, Lara Croft is the best at holding us at arm's length: she responds perfectly to your commands, but onscreen she seems to have a mind and agenda of her own.

Unlike people, game avatars often need a reason to be black. Partly this is down to the make-up of the industry itself, which remains predominantly white. Yet it's also due in part to the failure of the industry to understand how varied its audience has become. "I cut my teeth working with Richard Garriott and *Ultima*," explains Smith. "He very much tapped into the fact that, at the time, the average gamer was a white kid who was kind of nerdy, who would look at a powerfully-built blond superhero and map himself onto that." It seems that many designers have not yet caught up with the fact that the average gamer is now impossible to stereotype.

Customisation, a trend in avatar design that is quickly encroaching on the ascendancy of the fixed protagonist, provides one solution to the issue of misrepresentation of race and gender – even if it's something of a cop-out – by allowing the player to select these attributes for themselves. Its success in MMOGs alone suggests that customisation is a powerful tool for avatar creation, but it's not perfect. While it can be empowering, it can just as easily seem that the developer has simply given up. And handing character design over to the player, in a game that has otherwise been micro-surgically crafted, can give you the odd sensation that your avatar is somehow peripheral to the story. It can also oversimplify the relationship between player and avatar: complete customisation even goes so far as to imply that the relationship is a direct transfer – the player is the avatar and vice versa. If so, why are the effects of photo customisation often so disturbing? Surely that's an indicator that the avatar's role is far more complex – shielding the player from a direct engagement with the game's fiction as well as drawing them in.

> Complete customisation even goes so far as to imply that the the player is the avatar

And if it oversimplifies, customisation systems can also draw attention to the ways games underplay that relationship's importance. *Oblivion*, for example, has character customisation tools so advanced

it can take an hour or more to craft an avatar's face, yet the player then spends the subsequent 100 hours of gameplay staring at their back, or engaged in a firstperson viewpoint. More importantly, many games force you to customise your character before you know what the rest of the game is like. How can you decide what class to be, for example, without an understanding of how those classes affect the gameplay?

And creating the character is only half the problem – though that's often where development stops. *WOW* and other MMOGs attest to the fact that how an avatar changes over the course of the game is just as important to the player as how they started out. Why else would people spend time levelling-up and buying items? **Peter Molyneux**, whose *Fable* is one of the few titles so far to really focus on this area, says that getting such ideas to work is not easy. "In order for the game to be able to support an evolving relationship with the avatar, the game has to notice what he's doing. It's like turning up to work and people just ignoring you: if the player starts doing bizarre stuff and the gameworld and NPCs don't notice or react, it's useless. It's especially important as, while the game goes on, you're getting more powerful or becoming more famous. The game has to reflect that."

This idea that for the player to really understand their effect on their avatar, the gameworld has to reflect it back to them, has lead to one of the more surprising features in *Fable 2*: "What I want to do is make sure there are things in the world that love you. And one of those characters is going to be a dog. That dog, morphing and changing and reflecting what you're like while behaving like a dog – it's an immersive emitter of what you're doing in the world. The reason he's there is to constantly reinforce what's happening to your avatar. It can leap on things and piss on things – it really is an expression of what you're like as a character."





Wario

Seemingly a lazy inversion of Mario created for *Super Mario Land* on the Game Boy, Wario had to wait for the right vehicle in order for his full potential to emerge. The low risk nature of tinkering with a largely-unloved character meant that the team behind the *WarioWare* series could create a game far more in the thrall of its main protagonist – an extreme, surreal answer to most of Nintendo's carefully-judged output. The success of the franchise has made Wario into a real videogame rarity – an antihero who bends the player to his will rather than vice-versa.







Even without that extra level of feedback, *Fable*'s ongoing focus on the avatar worked because it carefully shared the customisation duties between the player – who could choose haircuts and clothing – and the consequences of the player's actions, which altered the avatar's appearance outside of their immediate control. Molyneux thinks that such blends, if carefully done, will become increasingly important. "With the advent of online, and people playing together and wanting to show how they're unique, that uniqueness has to really mean something rather than just: 'I wear a blue cloak and you wear a black cloak.' So I think the avatar reflecting who you are and what you've done is a very powerful concept. If combat scarred and changed your character – that alone would mean a lot, especially in MMORPGs. Playing online, where other people can see you, if you horribly disfigure a player's avatar, that is far more emotional than killing them and them respawning, because that lasts with them for all time."

Can you decide what class to be without knowing how those classes affect the gameplay?

But that level of control is some way off, and avatars still represent a near-impossible design conundrum. "My belief is that you can win or lose either way," laughs Smith. "The things we argue about for the longest are the things with no right and wrong answer. Half your team can say Duke Nukem and Lara Croft are really powerful characters that people clearly want, the others can go: 'Well, my favourite game is *Oblivion*, and the power of *Oblivion* is that you can be anything.' People will say: 'That's an RPG and the others are shooters,' but then, my favourite shooter is *System Shock*, where the avatar was deliberately vague."

Watching the way your actions in *Fable* change not only your avatar's appearance, but NPCs' reactions, is one of the more remarkable feats of the last gen



Oblivion's character creation tools can swallow hours of your time, but how many people create a face and body shape that looks like their own?

Chief, unlike Gordon Freeman, can speak. His gruff tones may alienate as many gamers as Freeman's beard, but his lack of a face encourages projection

So while avatars have been subject to the same explosion in complexity that all aspects of game creation have, they haven't benefited from it in the same way as, say, physics, because there is no overall point everyone is aiming for. Even in full bump-mapped 3D, many avatars continue to start out as two-dimensional clichés, and stay that way as the game progresses.

In fact, technology may currently be hindering the avatar. The problem, in a word, is realism. Massive polygon counts can make realistic things appealing, but it's harder to make abstract designs work as well as they used to. This bias towards greater fidelity may mean that we're giving ourselves the means to create more specific characters with a more limited appeal, who provide increasingly detailed clichés.

Yet technology may also be the saviour – if it ever comes down in price. If games become cheaper to make – or if the ennui of near-realism means players go back to wanting a wider range of game types and styles – greater risks can be taken, and titles can be more closely targeted at specific audiences. Perhaps all an issue as contradictory as avatars requires is a market that can match that contradiction, providing a variety of distribution methods and business models for many different kinds of games with different kinds of audiences.

"It's going to get more fragmented as we widen the range of what's acceptable in terms of games," agrees Smith. "We're broadening our audience all the time, we're appealing to more people. It's almost like indy movies. When I was a kid, I was into power fantasies. Now I want a little more depth. Somebody probably asked back in the early days of movies, when somebody did a couple of simple bank robbery pictures: 'How about romance?' And someone else said: 'Do you think that will ever be possible?' Now we have surrealist films, science fiction, soaps, all with different lead characters just right for their audience. And games will fragment the same way.

"Imagine if someone made a triple-A game tomorrow, and the protagonist was 80 years old," he says. "His movement model's very limited by his infirm condition, he's got very desperate goals – the old woman he loves isn't answering her phone. He can't break a window and climb in, he can't drive." He laughs. "I totally think that's coming. I don't know how long, but it's coming." And with it will come more games that allow you to be a villain, or a coward, or a lunatic – in short, games that give you someone to be as well as something to do.



Guybrush Threepwood

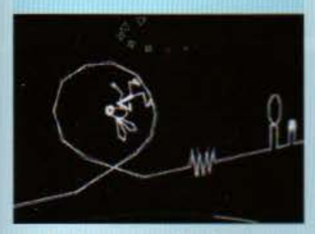
Adventure games, with their comic inclinations, mean that avatars often have more scope for displays of unheroic characteristics. Often cowardly, sometimes vindictive and engagingly stupid, *Monkey Island*'s Guybrush Threepwood is a perfect fit for the genre, and a fascinating proposition for others. He's also an indicator that perhaps all we really need to get a wider range of avatars are fewer guns and more rubber chickens.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Vib Ribbon



It's the theme tune that lures you back – but the tongue-twister gameplay, as you splice together shapes and buttons, keeps you absorbed beyond the nostalgia
PS, SCEI

Mojibribon



One thing leads to another, as Vibri's shrill cheers encourage a visit to Mojib's world of flying cows, pastel prettiness and some laid-back analogue rapping
PS2, SCEI

We Love Katamari



Is there any more romantic gesture imaginable than gathering the one you love a thousand flowers on Valentine's Day? Who says videogames don't do romance?
PS2, EA

Playing to grin
Games are stupid. Isn't that great?



Crackdown's basic narrative may make sense of its world, but the emergence of the gameplay ensures you can make glorious nonsense instead

There comes a moment in *Crackdown* when, having failed repeatedly to drive the souped-up SUV on to the crowning struts of a bridge, you sag in disappointment. And them a few seconds later, there comes a moment when you brighten, exit the car, pick it up with one hand, throw it in the air, and jump 30 feet up to meet it as it lands just where you wanted it to be.

It's a completely preposterous process. There's nothing to do up there, no virtue in driving awkwardly over girders before toppling into an inevitable gap. And yet the sense of victory – however absurd – is palpable. In this one, ridiculous moment comes a sense of completion far greater than that delivered through the story, or granted by the structured game missions.

It's old news, these days, that a large proportion of games are dedicated to replicating real-world events, or skinning familiar real-world dynamics with fantastical skins. It's the old promise of wish fulfilment, of the virtual delivering what's rationed, dangerous or exclusive in reality. But it's also old news how deliciously, indulgently exhilarating it is when games let you be ridiculous. When they let the scales slip out of alignment and abandon all sense of restraint. And when they do, it's often with far more reason than you'd think. Would you really rather win Wimbledon than get to tennis-battle giant fruit in the back of a truck? Would you really rather drive at Silverstone rather than build a giant loop-the-loop that launches you into the sun? Would you really rather plan an infantry attack on Sparta or whip the backsides of giant horses pulling an island through the sky?

Happily, *Virtua Tennis 3*, *TrackMania* and *God Of War II* credit you with a bit more imagination than the notion of wish fulfilment does. These are games that reckon a bit of what you fancy will never be as satisfying or enthralling as a bit of what you'd never imagined.

And, as the new generation of console hardware beds in, that spirit has never been more precious in gaming. Big budgets and big ideas are all to the good, but gaming will lose a vital part of its appeal if space isn't found in the new hardware's library for the silly, the stupid, the ludicrous, the puerile and the hare-brained.









Edge's scoring system explained: 1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



MOTORSTORM

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: MARCH 23
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: EVOLUTION STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E168, E172





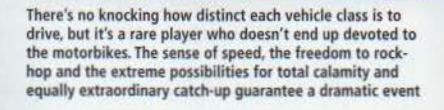
Although the deformable mud does indeed evolve as each set of tyres scores through it, the resulting mess has very little net impact on your racing progress

It's a peculiarity of the PS3's timetable that the thing its key European launch title demonstrates most clearly is how quickly we'll come to take its host machine's capabilities for granted. For importers who've already had the machine and the game for a few months already, it's easy to forget the impact that this game initially has.

Firstly: beauty. It's no easy feat to make a pretty game out of mud, dust, metal and sticks. Harder still when your commitment to the Monument Valley setting means there's an inherent monotony about the world – there's no easy jungle/ice world/ night-time neon showboating here. And yet Evolution has created an environment which is as breathtaking as it is disciplined and coherent. What could have been a tedious smear of brown and blue is instead a vibrant, lively playground, where each track offers a sense of exploration as well as a moment of spectacle.

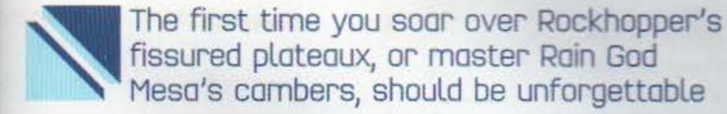
Second: amazement. The best of *MotorStorm*'s tracks are already becoming enshrined in the litany of great racing moments, but the first time you soar out over Rockhopper's fissured plateaux, or





There's no knocking how distinct each vehicle class is to drive, but it's a rare player who doesn't end up devoted to the motorbikes. The sense of speed, the freedom to rock-hop and the extreme possibilities for total calamity and equally extraordinary catch-up guarantee a dramatic event

master Rain God Mesa's daredevil cambers, should be unforgettable. The sense of space and scope – of being liberated from the racing line and of being able to intuitively respond to a vast and detailed landscape – is exactly the kind of step-up a new machine needs to offer.



The first time you soar over Rockhopper's fissured plateaux, or master Rain God Mesa's cambers, should be unforgettable

But there's a third element: surprise. For all its novelties, *MotorStorm* is an oddly old-fashioned game. There's no fluff: no career mode, no multiple game types, no decal editor. Just tracks and vehicles and furious, entertaining racing. It's been apparent from our first look at the game, back in **E**164, that riotous, knockabout exuberance was at the heart of the experience, and it's hard to think of a racer that stands up as well to an old-school afternoon of pass-the-pad, as those first two elements entertain the spectators while the third satisfies the player.

That timetable, though, means *MotorStorm* is in a strange situation: it's a launch title the dust has already settled on. Although there's been time since the Japanese release last year to improve the finish, and implement online, there's no radical difference to be found in this 'true' finished version. And that means that some of the more negative initial impressions still



stand, too. Some are trivial: load times, although understandable due to the vast scale of the tracks, still feel depressingly last-gen. Dismay at the lack of rumble still surfaces: it's enormously frustrating to be able to see the variations in deformable terrain, as slick puddles turn to corrugated mud and smooth rock gives way to loose scree, but not to be able to feel them. And, although the design of each level offers a huge range of alternative routes, and the topography of Monument Valley offers a near infinity of actual lines within those routes, it's common to find that you – and your opponents – get settled into a groove, something that undercuts a major part of the appeal.

And that problem is exacerbated by some of the game's more unfortunately old-fashioned tropes. The ticket system, which controls your progress by setting specific



The vehicle models have a decent dose of charisma, the alternate skins offering an old-school range of different looks. That said, waiting for them to load on the menu screen is – as ever – a real frustration



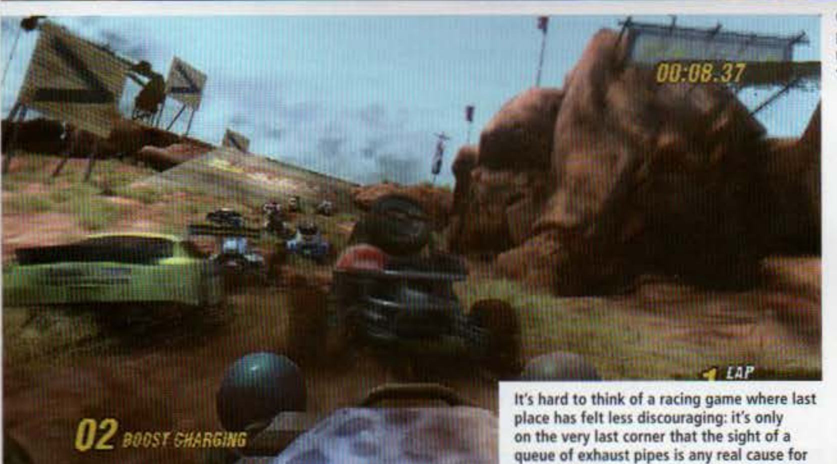




You won't always be aware of the much-vaunted interplay of AI rivalries between the different classes, but mixed races always guarantee an impressive spectacle, as well as an opportunity to take full advantage of every aspect of the more complex and specialist track designs







On paper it seems a great idea, but in practice the single-class races can be the most frustrating, as a bunched-up pack leads to unavoidable wipeouts in narrow sections

It's hard to think of a racing game where last place has felt less discouraging: it's only on the very last corner that the sight of a queue of exhaust pipes is any real cause for despair. Thanks to your boost, it need only take a handful of seconds to blast up the field

challenges of certain vehicle combos on certain tracks, acts as a barrier to being able to explore and exploit *MotorStorm*'s raw material as freely as you'd like. The rubber-banding, which does a magnificent job of responding to the unpredictable carnage which erupts several times a lap, can be brutally punishing to a last-minute mistake. It's hard not to be disappointed that a game with such a clear vision of how this new technology can be best used falls prey to old-fashioned problems of game structure and difficulty spikes.

But it's criticisms like these that mean it's happened again: that initial astonishment, which is what this game is geared to deliver, shouldn't be obscured by more pedestrian concerns. In the end, just as in the beginning, *MotorStorm* is what it always promised to be: a festival of speed, dirt and delighted vehicular lunacy. **[8]**



Line riders



***MotorStorm*'s premature release in Japan was never going to help it become a complete launch title, and as expected the anticipated multiplayer mode in this final version feels more tacked on than integrated. Options include the obligatory vehicle class selection and time of day settings, though night still isn't accessible on every track. There's an option to toggle the catch-up system on and off, though the benefit in fairness is offset somewhat by those moments when a scrum takes out every racer that happens to be nearby. But it's still an ideal playground for online bullying, and with the right number of experienced players (up to a maximum of 12), it's a thrilling, if volatile, contest.**



VIRTUA FIGHTER 5

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: $50 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), MARCH 23 (UK)
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: SEGA AM2







VF5 has a classic arcade aesthetic – hard-edged, precise and colourful, sacrificing background detail and particle effects for foreground flamboyance and speed. It's not realistic, but neither is it cold CG; the fighters having a slightly stylised, airbrushed, comic-book look



While it's no *Dead Or Alive*, there are dynamic elements to the rings that add some modest impact and spectacle to *VF5*'s understated bouts. Snow, water and splintering wood are all convincing effects, and there's tremendous satisfaction to be gained from shattering floor tiles with a good throw

Is it modesty, or pride? A technical, almost-realistic fighting game, and not at all given to theatrics, *Virtua Fighter* has sometimes seemed to hide its light under a bushel. Its unrivalled reputation for depth among serious players guarantees its dominance of the Japanese arcade scene (and de facto, the rest of the world's). But on consoles it has seemed content to be overshadowed by the extravagant showmanship of its rivals: *Tekken*'s fireworks, *Soul Calibur*'s ballet, *Dead Or Alive*'s slick cheek. In *Virtua Fighter*, the boys strip down, the girls cover up and everyone gets on with the serious business of fighting.

But those rivals have now shouted themselves hoarse, while *Virtua Fighter 5* finds itself with a new PlayStation to escort, on the back of a hugely ambitious and successful campaign in the arcades. It feels like Sega's fighter's time is now, and all it would take to win a legion of new fans is the slightest gesture towards the home console market. Nothing that would compromise its purity, of course, but a sign that Sega could bring some of the vision and energy behind the arcade's card scene and VFTV to bear on the living room. Do we get that sign? Yes and no. Does it matter? Not much.

What the hardcore have known for a long time, and what it is surely time for the rest of us to acknowledge, is that *Virtua Fighter* has the best fighting system out there, hands down. *Virtua Fighter 5* does nothing to endanger this. Its rock-solid basics – relatively restrained combos combined with the immaculate, scissor-paper-stone balance of hit, guard, evade and throw – are totally intact here. These basics make the fighters seem superficially similar to the uninitiated, but they also rule out luck, give equal weight to quick thought and physical dexterity, and hang every single bout on a knife edge. For that, a lack of instant gratification is a price that's definitely worth paying.

VF5's changes to the system are restrained, and mostly aimed at further balancing. A slightly slower pace, on throw speed especially, and more options for cancelling attacks and counterattacking during evades make fights more fluid and less staccato than they were before. The rough edges have been smoothed off the more intimidating characters – the fearsome Akira especially – and proponents of all fighters can look forward to some mouth-watering new possibilities. There's more room for self-expression and for individual fighting styles to develop, which can only be a good thing.



> The omission of VF4's indispensable tutorials in Virtua Fighter theory and practice will be lamented by both newcomers and more advanced players

Both new characters are extremely small and quite fast, Eileen boasting a physically weak but technically involving monkey kung-fu style, while El Blaze is more colourful and acrobatic, bouncing off the ropes and making darting attack runs. Between them they bring a good deal of charisma to *Virtua Fighter*'s distinguished but samey cast.

Something all characters have more of is sex appeal. It may not have been the belle of the ball for some time, but *Virtua Fighter* has grown old with consummate grace, and with *VF5* its looks now match its combat for sheer elegance. Everyone is more handsome and much better dressed, somewhat plastic up close, but lit during fights with the eye of a Hollywood cinematographer, the tiniest accessory picked out in crisp detail. *VF5* has blossomed into a devastatingly pretty fighting game – the prettiest since



In contrast to the unearthly sheen of the fighters' skin, their clothes are cut from some of the finest virtual cloth. The glossy finishes of silk and leather work beautifully with the colourful backlighting, and the cloth physics are exaggerated to emphasise fighters' moves





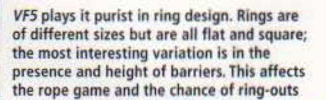












VF5 plays it purist in ring design. Rings are of different sizes but are all flat and square; the most interesting variation is in the presence and height of barriers. This affects the rope game and the chance of ring-outs





Two of the four costumes for each fighter are available right from the start, the third on reaching first Dan, the fourth on collecting seven orbs. Each set of clothes benefits from a large range of customisation options

As if to compensate for the two tiny new cast members, Eileen and El Blaze, big boys Jeffry and Wolf have bulked themselves up to an extraordinary, almost disorienting size. This saps *VF5* of a little of its hard-won credibility, but that doesn't mean you'll want to mess with them, of course. Meanwhile, longtime poster-boys Kage and Akira (above) sport the most classic VF look in their 1P costumes, but once you've unlocked their third outfits, you'll never look back

Dreamcast's *Soul Calibur* – without sacrificing its subtlety, or the clarity of its animation. To watch it is to want to be good at it.

But it's no easier to get better – in fact, in a blow to *VF5*'s otherwise good chance of attracting new players, it's actually harder to learn than before. The omission of *VF4*'s indispensable tutorials in *Virtua Fighter* theory and practice, and the accompanying challenges, will be lamented by both newcomers and more advanced players. It could only be excused if the singleplayer opponent AI was so finely tuned it was an education in itself, but that's half-true at best. The reward for solo play comes in other forms in *VF5* – more superficial forms, but arguably more compelling.

The scope for cosmetic customisation of the characters is immense, a huge stride on from even *VF4: Evolution*; and the humour and detail present in the trinkets, hairstyles and costumes, combined with the gorgeous new character models and the overall importance of self-expression in *VF*, make this an irresistible pull. You'll win items and money to buy more by ranking up in Versus mode as well, but it's guaranteed that your hunger for personalisation will draw you into long, addictive Quest mode sessions.

Quest mode is mostly as it was in *VF4*, paying cute homage to the game's arcade roots by offering a series of arcades and official tournaments in which to take on other 'players'; their erratic names and slogans (provided by real players) and customised outfits and emblems (see 'Badge of honour') really help to reinforce this conceit. The one change is to unlock all arcades from the start, offering seasoned players decent opposition from the off, a very welcome freedom.

So lots of promising steps towards transposing the arcade version's culture and sense of community to the PS3. But these steps have sadly been hobbled by a hard, mercenary decision on Sega's part in favour of those very arcades. As in *Evolution*, your characters are locked to the system save, making it impossible to carry them to another machine and fight a friend's; all that carefully cultivated style and those hard-won bragging rights are rendered next to meaningless as a result. It's a move made to stop the home version cannibalising the health of the arcade scene, understandable if frustrating in Japan, but here in the west it just cripples *VF5* full stop. And even if the lack of online play can be excused for reasons of technical inadequacy, the perfunctory implementation of VFTV is a squandered opportunity to integrate the home and arcade scenes through Sega's existing infrastructure.

In the arcades, *VF5* is a phenomenon, a truly modern videogame whose undisputed technical and design brilliance goes hand-in-hand with bold forward thinking about community and culture. For the home (on PS3 at least – who knows what, if anything, will be changed for the forthcoming 360 version) the game has been immaculately preserved but encased in a bubble; it's still brilliant, but it can't breathe. Whether through carelessness or cunning, AM2 has made it a lesser game, and that is neither modesty nor pride, but arrogance. Justified arrogance, because even in this compromised form, *Virtua Fighter 5*'s depth and beauty are unrivalled, and it can finally take its rightful place as the only game in town. **[8]**

Badge of honour



The one personalising touch that's exclusive to singleplayer Quest mode is the emblem – a tiny pixelated sketch worn under your player details that could be of a lion, a logo, an ice cream or a boy in a baseball cap. These are won from certain opponents and added to your collection, and they're sufficiently charming that finding one you love will mean more than doggedly catching them all. It's a shame they can't be won in Versus mode, however. A more intimidating challenge is to find and beat every single opponent in the game, as recorded in the game's roster. Since they only randomly fill slots in the arcades, it's a hunt even veteran *Pokémon* trainers might baulk at.



In-engine cutscenes often manage to have more charisma than the rather bland animations used for story events





Rogue Galaxy's intergalactic settings are often initially stunning, but there's no disguising how deserted and sterile they are. Enforced back-tracking only emphasises how repetitive many of the environments really are

Your companions in battle can be guided by a intensely restrictive set of strategic instructions, and will suggest courses of action – unleashing a special attack, using a potion etc – which you're free to endorse, reject or ignore





ROGUE GALAXY

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $40 (£20) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JUNE (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: LEVEL 5
PREVIOUSLY IN: E159

Limit breaking



Rogue Galaxy's QTE attacks are the perfect example of the game's roster of decent ideas awkwardly implemented. Powered by physically collecting short-lived orbs dropped by enemies in the course of battle, it requires some finicky footwork, and a compliant camera, to activate. Then a series of timed button prompts allow you to unleash a super-powered attack, but the poor visual design, coupled with a lack of any real challenge, means the process can never quite become automatic, but equally fails to qualify as interesting.

Rogue Galaxy is all about space-faring, but it's a game that makes you long for time travel. Originally released in Japan in the autumn of 2005, Sony's plan was for it to become the jewel in the PS2's RPG crown. A reinvention, and an elaboration, of the mix of active combat and obsessive item wrangling that had brought *Dark Cloud* and *Dark Chronicle* such affectionate acclaim (if modest sales), its space pirate setting was supposed to prove more palatable to the wider market. And, in the autumn of 2005, it came pretty close.

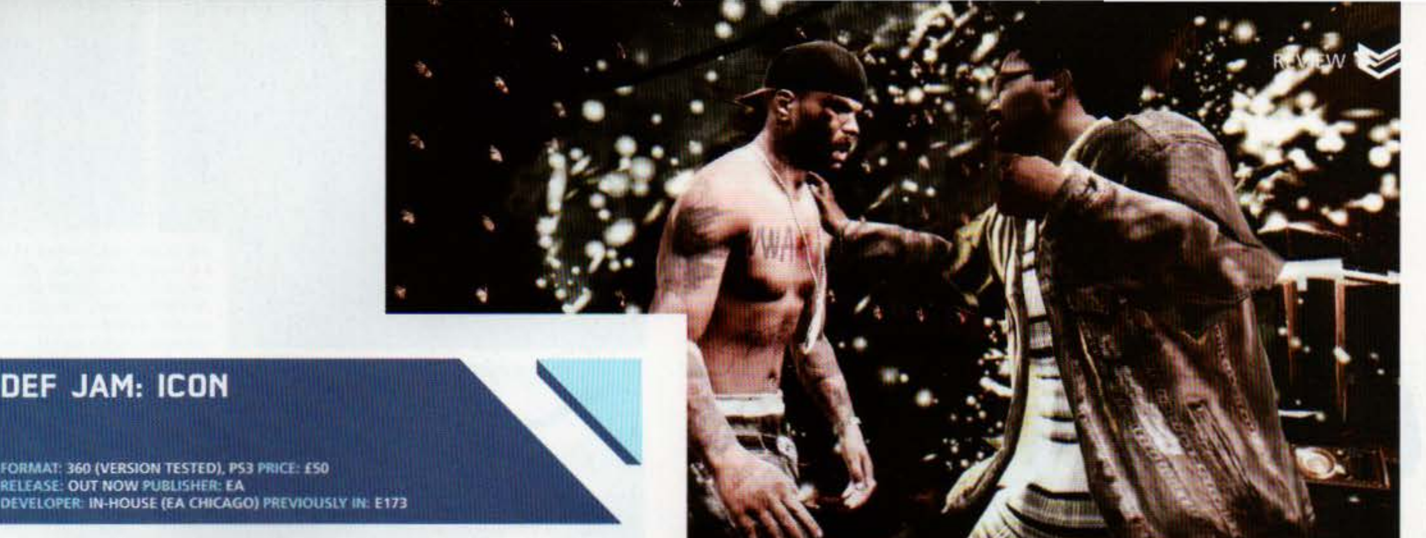
But six months later, *Final Fantasy XII* arrived to reclaim its crown, and in the process made a mockery of *Rogue Galaxy's* inventions. Indeed, between it and Level 5's own *Dragon Quest VIII*, there's little space left for this adventure to explore, especially since the games share so much common ground. The latter trumps *Galaxy's* cel-shaded charm, its pastoral orchestrations and its item-combining allure, and the former the ballet of battle, the spectacle of Star Wars-inspired fantasy and the intricacies of an item-dependent skill tree. Where *Rogue Galaxy* once stood a chance of feeling fresh, it now feels tired.

So, for western audiences, where it arrives after both of Square Enix's epics on both sides of the Atlantic, it has a harder job to impress, and seems to fall at every hurdle. So although the tale of Jaster, an orphaned lad from a backwater planet swept up into a life of interplanetary piracy after a case of mistaken identity, promises flair and scope, it's delivered with the pedestrian inevitability of a hundred other RPG plotlines. The active battles – which are truly dynamic rather than using *FFXII's* clever fudge – are clumsy and samey, penned in by a myopic camera. The Revelation Flow through which character skills are unlocked, and which is instantly reminiscent of *FFXII's* licence board, is hampered by clumsy menus and offers little opportunity for strategy. Plotting is weak, scripting hackneyed, voice-acting only just above the genre's woeful par, and the music exhaustingly insipid. Dungeons are formed of long, channelled forks, demanding that you run the repetitive gauntlet of random battles while visiting point A to collect the item you need to access point B without which a visit to point C will be fruitless. Only luck will decide if you get to visit them in the right order, or suffer a tedious trudge.

It's a testimony to the rapid evolution of this once moribund genre that *Rogue Galaxy* has been left so far behind. But it's also a testament to Level 5's inherent instinct for charm and compulsion that this game manages – even in 2007 – to hold its head above the crowd, even if it's only by the most slender of margins **[6]**



It's not exactly a difficult game, but the fluster of battle can lead to a quick game over which dumps you, infuriatingly, back to the original boot-screen of the game



DEF JAM: ICON

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 PRICE: £50
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA CHICAGO) PREVIOUSLY IN: E173

As sensible as the decision to make *Def Jam* a hybrid beat 'em up, rhythm game and business sim was, you really have a problem if the management reminds you of *Rockstar Ate My Hamster* and the fighting *Pit Fighter*. That big idea about having the music trigger environmental hazards, in turn dictating the flow of combat, must have looked great on paper.

But it isn't in practice. Videogame fights generate their own rhythms, after all, and few are as grinding and lethargic as those of R&B hip-hop. Thanks in no small part to a slavish love of motion capture over more manageable keyframe animation, the fights in *Icon* are sluggish, crude and practically underwater when it comes to control. Spontaneity isn't entirely out of the question; laying down your own deadly beat and sandwiching it between a throw and dodge suggests style and momentum, but it's all so incidental and lacking in high level technique.

Haunted by EA Chicago's only other work in this genre, *Fight Night*, *Icon* is an utter kluge. Total Punch Control may have been crystal clear in making the thumb your primary weapon, but here you're left to wander between each aspect of the controller with little sense of purpose. Fighting styles unique to the different licensed stars have been grabbed from reality with no attempt to plane them into a balanced overall discipline, few characters enjoying the ability to even run at a distant opponent, instead simply hauling their constipated backside into attack range before lurching into a haymaker or grapple.

It takes a fair degree of tunnel vision to make anything quite like it – plus distractions such as product placement and licensing. *Icon*'s environments stink of misspent man hours and creative focus, which of course makes them wonderful if taken out of context. Though often bleached down to a single tone they're never dull and at times even hypnotic, beats sending seismic ripples through a world that literally pumps up and down to the basic rhythm. Shadows literally dance about splintered interactive furniture, and on 360 a custom soundtrack selection will have its own unique effect.

But functionally, as arenas, they're wasted. Speaker blasts, explosions and scenic props send people floating from pillar to post in a manner that becomes all too familiar all too soon, just like *Icon*'s sobering attitude. Of hip-hop's two personalities – the mischievous clown or the hi-tech redneck – EA chose the latter where progenitors Aki Corp, brilliantly, did not. The result is a bilious game that's exactly what you expected when the concept of a hip-hop brawler was first announced: high on rhyme and bereft of reason. **[5]**



Icon at least improves as it labours on, old-time gangstas such as Sticky Fingaz ushering in some much needed enthusiasm to its vocal track, the later environments heavy in visual effects











Cribs come and go with little explanation, each providing an identical selection of wardrobe, email client and artist management. Presumably they're indicative of status, but in a career mode as botched as this one it's hard to tell. What the grand piano in this example is for is anyone's guess, unless it grants the owner the power to steal other people's melodies for use in dodgy hip-hop records

The chronic



Meandering career modes are fast becoming a studio tradition for EA Chicago, with life as a music mogul in *Icon* proving to be as exhausting as it is inconsequential. Joining the usual urban chores – answering emails and shopping for branded clothes and accessories – is an accountancy role for keeping your hit factory in check and the money rolling in. Just a couple of fights in and the game has already flooded your inbox with more nonsense than you can bring yourself to read, the arbitrary release of each new track requiring its own slider-determined promotion budget. The impetus to shop dries up almost immediately, leaving you to spend money, make money, and gain nothing in the process.



GOD OF WAR II

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SANTA MONICA)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E173

Flight plan



The addition of flying sections may sound like a yellow card is about to be held aloft, but these intermissions are far from as excruciating as they could've turned out. On-rails and on-Pegasus, the flights are few indeed, but retain the game's epic sense and continuity of scene as capably as anything else. Left and right dive moves, along with some bread-and-butter attacks from Kratos, deal with any Griffon-riding raiders on your flanks, while a dash move propels you into any troublemakers up ahead. The strategy is plain, but the payoff is typically brutish and candid – once an enemy has been weakened, Kratos can hijack their mounts and sever their wings, before flinging them to earth with a slow-mo lob.

Sony's decision to retain *God Of War*'s sequel as a last blush for PS2 and not dunk it into the unregulated nether-regions of current-gen development may have left some smarting, but it nonetheless feels smart. It's not because *God Of War II* has any grand new concepts to strut, but simply because there are so very few games capable of working with such brilliant and unpretentious fury, something that remains in righteous flow here.

GOWII won't change any perceptions that followed in the wake of the original – combat that's ruled as much by camera angles as by combo strategies, ridiculous carnage and spectacle above all else, and moments of slight irritation when Kratos shows himself to be far more skilled at interacting with his enemies than his surroundings. It remains a game that strives to make the player feel like a tour de force of nature, carving through a procession of megabucks set pieces that succeed well enough to prove that the original wasn't just a lucky strike.

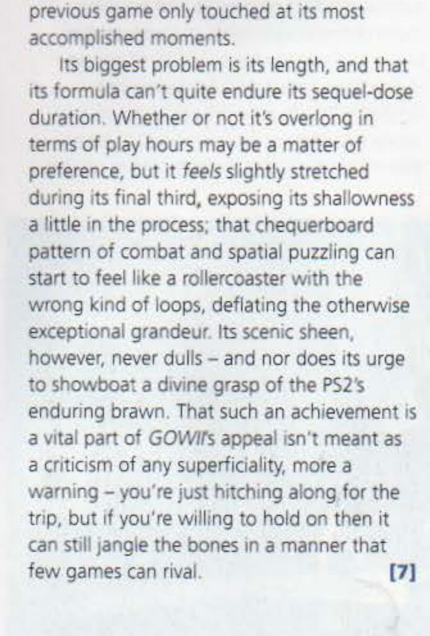
For something with so little actual adventure to it – there's only your nose to follow, and the next step is whatever the game's next corridor throws down in front of you – it can feel like a viciously entertaining voyage, provided you don't look too closely and remain content to ride out its heavily pre-rendered thrills. If not, it'll feel like dispassionate hoop-jumping and macho bellowing that just won't stand up to more refined action alternatives. But, inarguably, it's an outing that's taken visual polish and scale to a plateau that the previous game only touched at its most accomplished moments.

Its biggest problem is its length, and that its formula can't quite endure its sequel-dose duration. Whether or not it's overlong in terms of play hours may be a matter of preference, but it *feels* slightly stretched during its final third, exposing its shallowness a little in the process; that chequerboard pattern of combat and spatial puzzling can start to feel like a rollercoaster with the wrong kind of loops, deflating the otherwise exceptional grandeur. Its scenic sheen, however, never dulls – and nor does its urge to showboat a divine grasp of the PS2's enduring brawn. That such an achievement is a vital part of *GOWII*'s appeal isn't meant as a criticism of any superficiality, more a warning – you're just hitching along for the trip, but if you're willing to hold on then it can still jangle the bones in a manner that few games can rival. **[7]**

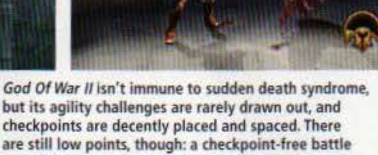


Two sub-weapons can be equipped alongside the Blades of Chaos – the Barbarian Hammer and the Spear of Destiny. The former casts a spell to conjure up an undead spirit army, while the latter offers combos and explosions



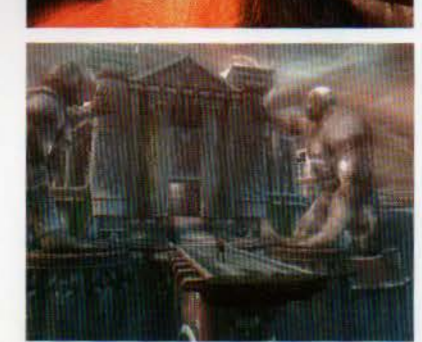






God Of War II isn't immune to sudden death syndrome, but its agility challenges are rarely drawn out, and checkpoints are decently placed and spaced. There are still low points, though: a checkpoint-free battle gauntlet towards the game's end will be a brand new Hades' spiked wall all over again, for some







Certain creatures can begin to feel like a chore, as much down to their rote attacks as the game's insistence on drawing out Kratos' tale. The stone-clad minotaur types, for example, are some of the game's weakest mini-bosses



As economical as the controls are, the jump button is sticky and overworked. Holding it down charges a higher jump, and also generates lock-on targets on nearby enemies, which, once in the air, can be attacked with a swift Remote thrust

SONIC AND THE SECRET RINGS

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (SONIC TEAM)

It's a measure of how far Sonic has strayed from the path his fans imagined for him that a slapdash sortie like *Sonic And The Secret Rings* can be considered a spiritual homecoming for the hedgehog, and a return to form of sorts for Sonic Team. The aimless, out-of-context wanderings of even the better *Adventures* reached their nadir in last year's scandalous *Sonic The Hedgehog*, and it could no longer be ignored: Sonic was never meant to do anything other than follow his own feet, fast.

That dream has been kept alive by the likes of the DS' *Sonic Rush* and the enduring success of back catalogue reissues, and now resurfaces in a full-blown home console title in the form of this Wii exclusive. The level design isn't entirely dissimilar from *Sonic The Hedgehog*'s infuriating assault courses, with the vital difference that Sonic runs them on rails, the player steering him left to right (and occasionally reining in his perpetual motion) with tilts of a laterally-held remote. Camera issues negated (almost), control quirks smoothed away (almost), the road is clear for a ferocious, dizzying blur of an arcade reaction-test to delight any purist – almost.

There are still awkwardnesses aplenty. The story, told in sketchy comic-book panels, teams Sonic with a cute teen genie and plunges him jarringly and pointlessly into the Arabian Nights – although nobody seems to have told the level designers. We don't recall Scheherazade weaving tales around dinosaurs, pirates and factory robots run amok. It's easier, though, to shrug off this thematic nonsense than to avoid feeling short-changed by the mere seven levels. Each is padded out with ten additional achievement-based remix missions and a boss fight, and there's plenty of scope for the dedicated in endless score-attack rehearsals, but in terms of hard polygons it's a paltry amount of game.

As was the case with *Banana Blitz*, Sega is proving adept at getting the best out of the Wii's modest graphical performance: *Secret Rings* is bright, solid and unbelievably fast, with a huge draw distance. The final level is a dazzling videogame dream in classic Sega style

Secret Rings' poverty of content isn't even remotely balanced by the ill-fitting encumbrance of a pseudo-RPG levelling and skill system (see 'Skills laboured') that hobbles early stages more than it empowers later ones. Its saving graces are that it's spectacular, exhilarating and tough. There's a fine line between rote-learning frustration and seat-of-the-pants glee in on-rails arcade games, and *Secret Rings* wobbles either side of it perceptibly, but seldom stays on the wrong side for too long.

It's a proper platform game, nothing like as incompetent or misguided as its 360 and PS3 stablemate. But compare *Secret Rings* with *Banana Blitz*, and it's clear Sonic Team could learn a lot from its *Monkey Ball* colleagues when it comes to a strong yet supple understanding of what makes their mascots great, and how to offer challenge and satisfaction through design rather than trickery. Maybe it's time to stage a coup, and crown AiAi Sega's platform king. **[5]**



Alongside the rings are glowing orbs which charge up Sonic's time powers – it's not just the setting that has been lifted from *Prince Of Persia*. Slow-mo is useful but exaggerated; the super dash pointless outside of time trials





As we are coming to expect of Sega's Wii titles, there's some 50 minigames attached. These are all designed for multiplayer, and most offer disposable fun, but have little imagination and are nothing to go back to

Skills laboured



Sonic levels up as you progress, gradually unlocking the 100 skills in the game. These can't all be used at the same time, so must be equipped – and let's take a moment here to mourn the appearance of the word 'equip' in a Sonic game – to one of four 'skill rings', essentially presets that can be tailored to different levels' requirements. However, the choice is seldom as meaningful as it should be. Some skills provide fundamental changes to the play style – like the excellent jump cancel, which also acts as an indispensable, immediate brake – while others improve Sonic's attributes, including, unforgivably, the actual quality of the controls (one promotes 'smoother movement to the left and right'). Either way, they should have been there from the start.



The economy has been well adjusted for *United*, providing an incentive yet seldom pricing you out. Bonus Coppers are awarded for every day you log in, and while first attempts at official times carry no charge, even bronze medal performances reap rewards



TRACKMANIA UNITED

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ASCARON DEVELOPER: NADEO
PREVIOUSLY IN: E172



TrackMania's engine now scales further at both the top and bottom ends, making it a viable windowed game and a thing of beauty when maxed out. Be warned: a liberal attitude towards track complexity has inspired real system-killers

Road movies



One of *TrackMania's* most popular and versatile features is its moviemaking toolset, already responsible for the 1K Project II phenomenon and *that* Vauxhall advert (prior to it being professionally re-rendered). Video browsing is another feature integrated seamlessly into *United's* GUI, though for full-length, high-res versions you'll be dumped to an external media player. Examples such as those mentioned above and Hydrofise's stunning The Hunted (pictured) are well worth the trip, however. Many of the camera angles and special effects available in the editor can also be bound to specific points on the tracks you build, making for dynamic-looking races that are inevitably an absolute nightmare to control.

Nadeo needs to start beating its chest a bit more when it comes to *TrackMania*. It should put it on shelves in a Scalextric-sized box, picturing on the front a mind-boggling tangle of scenery and track framed by an impossibly fresh summer's day. You turn the box over and there's an array of pieces and vehicles so large and so tightly laid out that the descriptions are illegible. Then there's an asterisk in the bottom corner, followed by some small print that reads 'Warning: actual contents may surpass.'

Fans of the three-year-old series know it's not the deepest racing game in the world. A mere plaything, it's just a step removed from a trigger and an electrified rail. You hold the up cursor key for as long as you dare, veering and adjusting with the left and right until your car clatters from the track and wallows like an upturned toy on the carpet. Then you reset, either at the start or at a recent checkpoint, and off you go again. It's not the greatest construction set in the world either, its built-in track editor seldom making clear which part goes where and what function it provides. But as a combination of the two, built upon an engine that could blow *Ridge Racer's* clean off the road, it's unbeatable.

Thanks to ManiaLinks, the big new feature that stops this version being simply a compilation of familiar tracks, it's now also one of the most important models for online gaming that online gaming has ever seen.

The key to bringing networked gamers together, believes Nadeo, is keeping them apart – which is why *United* separates its players into regional hubs from the moment they first log in. Each has its own forum, competition lobby and time trial leaderboard, all just a click away from the main menu. And it's hugely successful. Suddenly the nonsense global scoreboards of Xbox Live and PSN, designed no doubt to validate



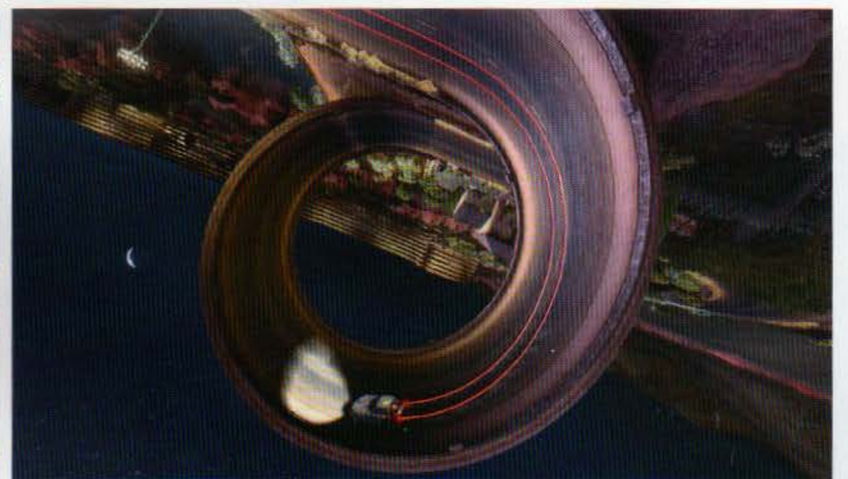
User content extends far beyond tracks and cars. Videos, textures, sound effects, music and ghosts are all available, the virtual proceeds going to both the authors and Nadeo

those services with the suggestion of mass involvement, are exposed as being badly hampered by their own ambition. *United's* tight-knit communities are a welcoming, sensible and above all enjoyable blueprint for the way things should be.

Should you want to delve further into *TrackMania's* long-standing creative community, however, now is the time. Nadeo's presence in *United* is astonishingly subdued – it acts as if it's sponsoring a game that simply appeared by chance in a corner of the internet. The ManiaLinks front page features nothing but user comments, banners for popular creators and links to various aspects of your own online profile. There's no corporate advertising of any kind, the series' revised virtual currency, Coppers, existing solely to add value to player contributions and significance to official time attacks. How long this system can remain unspoiled is something Nadeo alone can answer, but so long as it does this community is sure to explode. Like a highway to heaven for gaming on PC, *TrackMania* can only get better the further on it goes. **[8]**







United contains all previous *TrackMania* content, with pre-made tracks and building blocks for all environments. The advance release of the game to its most proactive users has already stocked ManiaLinks with a wealth of downloads











Dominator further pushes the PS2's visuals – at this late stage, the elderly console is impressing considerably, and *Dominator's* pin-sharp graphics and vibrant colours make it something of a high water mark for the system





BURNOUT DOMINATOR

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), PSP
PRICE: £40 (PS2) £35 (PSP) RELEASE: MARCH 23
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA GUILDFORD) PREVIOUSLY IN: E173

In retrospect, *Burnout Revenge* can be seen as something of a conceptual backward step for Criterion's superlative racing series. Whereas, in previous iterations, much of the tension *Burnout* trades in was generated from the narrow avoidance of traffic, the intentional ramming of civilian vehicles – via Traffic Checking – substituted cathartic carnage for a finely-tuned risk/reward mechanic. The results were never less than entertaining, and the willingness to change the focus of the series was a brave and successful one, but nevertheless, something seemed to be lost.



Maniac mode, which adds a time limit extended by dangerous driving, is an entertaining addition but not one of huge importance, and one that is difficult to see as having a lasting legacy – the emphasis on carving up cars is prevalent everywhere else in the game, after all

That something seems to have returned in *Burnout Dominator*, yet another last hurrah (along with *Okami*, *Final Fantasy XII* and *God Of War II*) for the PS2, which surely has never played host to such a dazzling array of games in such a short period before. It's a conscious step backwards, a tightening of focus, and the result is a game that marries the pure racing of *Burnout 2* to the Takedowns and glamour of *Burnout 3*. For the most part it's a strong, thrilling retrenchment.

The focus is once again on the Burnout, and chaining Burnouts via constant dangerous driving. Near-misses, catching air, drifting and smashing opponents into sidings or other vehicles once again contribute towards boosting, and many of the game's disparate modes (such as Maniac mode, which demands constant driving along the knife-edge between success and chassis-crumpling disaster) require near-constant Burnouts in order to succeed, certainly in the final stages of the game.

The result is an experience that is almost unbearably tense, and the system highlights just how successful the game is in other areas – the tight handling, the simple but satisfying feel of the powersliding dynamic, sterling visuals that lend every



The differences between the handling of the various series of cars – Tuned, Classic and so on – are not as pronounced as you might expect initially. Nevertheless, by the time you reach the game's latter stages, the speed at which the game roars along is both thrilling and a stunning technical achievement for the developer

crash a hefty, wince-inducing reality. There's even another return to *Burnout 2* with a plethora of wide, sweeping corners through certain tracks – Tuscan View is a case in point, a relentlessly thrilling hurtle through a town centre.

Burnout Dominator is an undeniably exciting and well-formed game, and yet, for all its purity of vision, it still feels like something of a pause for breath, a stop-gap until *Burnout 5* reaches PS3 and Xbox 360 later this year. While the main game is varied and addictive, extras are limited to World Record time-trialling, the signature Crash Junctions notable by their absence, an omission that is sure to baffle and infuriate long-time fans of the series.

So, while it's not the definitive culmination of the genre so far, *Dominator* remains a compelling reminder that, while slight in comparison to its older brothers, *Burnout* still knows how to be a mean racing game.

[7]

All around the world



Along with the Crash Junctions, the World Tour concept has also been ejected from the main championship. Instead, there's a more linear – and navigable – series of challenges, each focused on a type of car, the aim being to unlock and beat the Dominator Series. Nevertheless, success and winning medals opens up races in later series, meaning that the game isn't restricted to a linear progression, and each series hosts a variety of races; Burning Lap time trials, Near Miss challenges, Grands Prix and more, including the new Maniac mode.





Men's events become games of chess-like tactics played at an incredible pace, but the replays of your greatest victories (and failures) consistently fail to frame the action with any coherence, which is disappointing

Net call



Sony has missed a serious poster videogame for its own network service by allowing *Virtua Tennis 3*'s online court action to slip through the net. This leaves anyone hungry for hooked-up play, and lucky enough to own both PS3 and 360, with only one option worth buying into. Especially when 360 benefits from exhibition matches, ranked ladders and a spectator mode. PS3 gamers can at least enjoy the inclusion of multiplayer minigames, all seven of which provide some unique and thrilling competitive bouts, from jostling and weaving through a giant tennis ball avalanche to the compulsive curling challenge. For online junkies, however, it's game, set, match for Xbox Live.



VIRTUA TENNIS 3

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PSP PRICE: £50 (360, PS3) £30 (PC, PSP) RELEASE: MARCH 23 PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: SEGA AM3 (PS3), SUMO DIGITAL (OTHERS) PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E172

Even the most treasured games can sometimes leave devotees behind. *Pro Evolution Soccer*, for instance, submits fans to inevitable anguish with every instalment, purging a player's confidence with the previous title and leaving them as fresh and raw as an exfoliated newborn in the face of the new edition's retooled feel and touch. *Virtua Tennis 3* isn't nearly so cruel, but Sega has definitely redrawn the court lines.

Largely, the gameplay changes feel due to an increase in the depth of animation. While it can't compete with *PES* for sheer mind-boggling breadth of movements and actions, *Virtua Tennis 3* shares that game's crucial appeal in enabling the seasoned player to accomplish notable on-screen feats that newer recruits often fail to replicate. With more fluid and varied movement, however, comes an increase in demands.

Previous *VT* titles could often be tamed by employing sweetspots – returning a serve to the extreme opposite end of the opponent's baseline, say. While *VT3* doesn't make such lethal shots an impossibility, success is now about far more than button-reflexes. Before, it was a case of getting forehand-strong characters into forehand-friendly positions – or forcing rivals into playing shots that didn't play to their own specialties. Now both body-shape and momentum act more deeply on shot execution. A cross-court slice isn't quite so effective if it hasn't been wound up or prepared for properly.

Fans who may bemoan this more challenging stance should soon be tempted back by *Virtua Tennis*' legendary charm, however. The expansive animation routines will bring both rewarding pleasure – as your player flicks the racket between their legs to win a vital point – and crushing humiliation as a turn performed too quickly by a wrongfooted rival sees them slip straight on to their backside.

Meanwhile World Tour mode has received a minor overhaul, with such additions as injuries, some superbly wacky minigames and a new training centre for enhancing your character's attributes. Injuries should worry only the reckless – it can be rather difficult to force even an over-fatigued player into picking up a career-threatening crock – and a cure is as simple as going on holiday from your home base. A focus on training is essential, however.

It's unfortunate, then, that while the bite-sized challenges are compelling in their madness (feed crocodiles, repel ball-spitting aliens, play bingo) the rote-learning offered by the training centre tires quickly. Yet, with the new demanding play style, commitment to both is required to build a world-beating player, even for gamers accomplished enough to baseline opponents into submission.

Virtua Tennis 3 is the first full-blooded simulation in a series that has always exhibited a finely-tuned but arcadey feel. This new outing for Sega's ever-appealing sports series is a deeper, more serious and demanding beast than before, yet happily manages to retain the series' lighthearted atmosphere and is, on occasion, utterly bonkers. *Virtua Tennis*' ability to tread the line between harsh realism and bright fantasy means that, while fans may feel left behind, all Sega has done is move the party to another venue.

[8]





Virtua Tennis 3's licensed stars resemble meat-puppets more than actual humans. As is often the case with create-a-star, your own creations are more appealing



While the minigames are a highlight of the game's World Tour mode, in multiplayer their barmy brilliance can provide relentlessly comic contests



LUNAR KNIGHTS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $30 (£15)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US) TBA (UK), PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS PREVIOUSLY IN: E164

Not content with revitalising Nintendo's fortunes and altering the age-range of gaming forever, the DS has somehow found time to rescue the *Boktai* series from the consequences of its own innovations. Always a compelling idea, the original games' rigid demands for authentic sunlight to provide ammo for the ensuing vampire-slaying meant playing was often more of a chore than a challenge. The platform shift from GBA has allowed *Lunar Knights* to keep the core of its mechanic, but by caging the sun and moon in the top screen gives the designers more control over their own creation.

Dropping the *Boktai* name and central characters, but retaining the series' principles, *Lunar Knights*' general tone is one of refinement. A simple – but not simple-minded – dungeon-crawl at heart, questions as to how the game would play stripped of its greatest gimmick can be put aside. Despite the larger cast, the resulting adventure is more tightly-plotted than before, and while your initial playthrough may be short, it's a vivid and memorable experience, filled with a real variety of set-pieces.

Coffin-dragging has been replaced by somewhat incongruous space combat that, utilising the stylus to both move and fire, retains the frantic sense of multi-tasking inherent in the original, but otherwise trades slog for quick-twitch spectacle. Equally, the playable characters are well-balanced, and elements such as the new weather system and weapon upgrades provide depth for those who want it, without confusing the main narrative. Presentation, always a *Boktai* strength, remains excellent throughout, with immensely appealing anime cutscenes, and a bombastically strange jazz score that sounds like the Moonlighting theme performed by Napoleon Bonaparte.

Fast, engrossing and perfectly attuned to the needs of a handheld, *Lunar Knights* addresses the previous games' failings without feeling like a retreat, providing refinement without too much dilution. The DS may have tamed the *Boktai* design, but it's also revealed it to be something of a classic. **[7]**

The deepest cut





A Kojima game to the core, even though he produces rather than directs, *Lunar Knights*' anime cutscenes and lengthy exchanges of dialogue provide plenty of scope for philosophical inquiry. Discussions include, naturally, the futility of war, the hierarchical nature of human societies and the subjective nature of right and wrong. When spoken by manga-haired vampire killers, such topics become almost unbearably profound. The cutscenes themselves are a modern marvel for the DS – vibrant and brilliantly designed, blending 2D and 3D animation elements, they are hard to skip – a good thing, it turns out, because you can't.



Lucian and Aaron, a swordsmith and a gunslinger, provide the DS's customary twin playable characters for the initial runthrough. The inclusion of a target-lock is a welcome addition to the often messy task of isometric brawling









Stealth makes a return, but wall-hugging is out, and the DS's microphone is on-hand, providing a means of distracting enemies by whistling – like Solid Snake rapping on a wall. Although sneaking plays a smaller role than previously, its use in clearly marked-out sections that play something like puzzles is extremely successful



Space sections bring a change of pace, and a touch of 3D charm to a game which closely resembles its GBA cousins



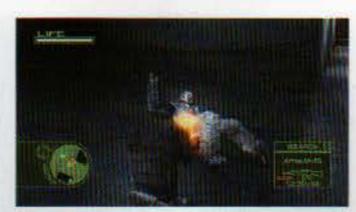
VAMPIRE'S RAIN

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£29)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN) TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: AQ INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: ARTOON

Vampire's Rain can be summed up in a high-concept pitch that Jerry Bruckheimer must be kicking himself for not dreaming up: *Splinter Cell* with vampires.

That's not facetiousness. Artoon's stealth extravaganza takes the most obvious reference points from Ubisoft's series and appropriates them for itself in a shameless manner; green-tinged night vision, crab-scuttling sidewise movement, black-garbed special operatives, zip lines, hugging walls to peek out around corne – the list is comprehensive and as familiar as Sam Fisher's gruff tones. And, to qualify the second part of the pitch, it's got vampires in it – the undead now almost equalling the warm-blooded population of Earth, colonising their own cities. The title of the game is relevant in that rain dampens vampire senses, explaining much of the dreary meteorological nature of the game.

The surprise is how competent it all is, if not hugely entertaining. The second-hand mechanics work; utilising surrounding buildings to plot an enemy-avoiding route gives the illusion of choice; sneaking past the red vision-cone of a radar-recognised 'nightwalker' is simple and makes sense. And yet there are moments of baffling stupidity too – one early example requires you to shoot a flock of crows, as disturbing them via your own movement might alert a nearby enemy. There is also the resolutely clockwork nature of progression to consider; despite the aforementioned illusion of choice, there is really only one pre-determined way to conquer a given mission, each stealthy ability in reality a functional button-press to move the game along.

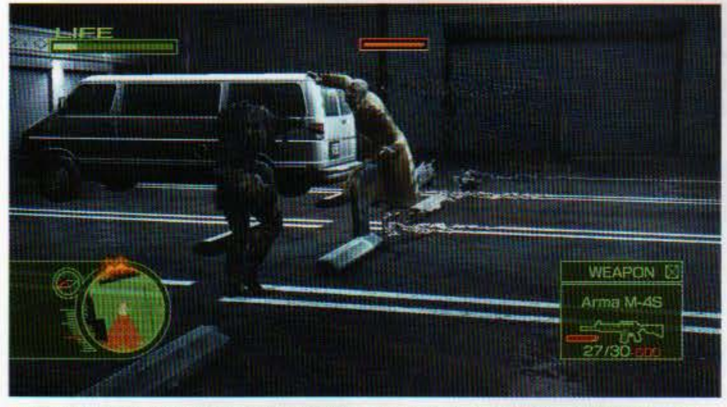




While the use of ziplines isn't a unique property of *Splinter Cell*, it's easy to see that Ubisoft's franchise has been the main influence on *Vampire's Rain*. Sadly, the game isn't as flexible or subtle as Sam Fisher's various adventures

Perhaps the most frustrating element of the game is its difficulty. At times patronisingly simple, when it comes to combat the tables are swiftly turned – the first encounter with the undead sees you finished off in seconds unless you can aim and fire accurately within the space of a second. As unforgiving as the various *Splinter Cell*s might be, *Vampire's Rain* is is an even harsher mistress.

All of which is a shame, as that high concept melding of espionage and the undead could have made for toothsomely enjoyable B-movie fun. As it is, this is straightforward, competent, frustrating and uninspiring. **[5]**

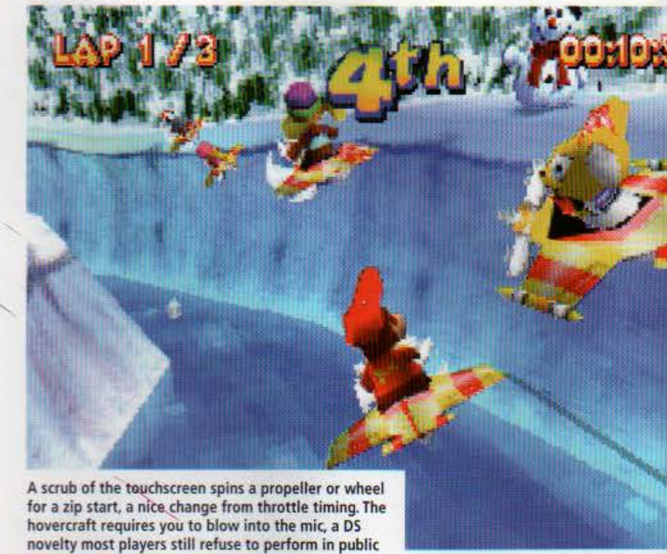


Manage to successfully take down a 'nightstalker' and you're treated to a fittingly graphic death as the vampire burns and melts. Sadly, actually killing a vamp is a more problematic task than it really should be



DIDDY KONG RACING DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $40 (£20) RELEASE: NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: RARE



A scrub of the touchscreen spins a propeller or wheel for a zip start, a nice change from throttle timing. The hovercraft requires you to blow into the mic, a DS novelty most players still refuse to perform in public

How's this for reminder of what was, and a glimpse of what might have been: Rare's first DS game, in the form of a heavily embellished remake of its ten-year-old N64 racing adventure. Rare's split from Nintendo was never the cleanest of breaks, but this is the old flames' most indulgent bout of reminiscing yet, indulged by a relaxed Microsoft that perhaps has its eye on the lucrative possibilities of *Viva Piñata DS*.

The core of the game remains: a valiant, but rather laboured, attempt to marry kart racing with the collection, exploration and open progression of the post-*Mario 64* platform adventure. But it's far from a perfunctory conversion. Graphics and sound have been polished, new characters and tracks added, and there's a thorough multiplayer suite, sporting some entertaining new modes and supporting six players via download, multi-cart or wifi play. The adventure itself is extended with a return visit to every track on rails, via flying carpet, using the stylus to move the firstperson view, pop balloons and collect coins, as well as stylus-guided retreads of the boss challenges. Kart and player emblems can be customised, and there's also a basic track editor.

The intervening decade hasn't been especially kind to *Diddy Kong Racing*, but the superb *Mario Kart DS* is more unkind still, and Rare's inexperienced, gauche fumbling the DS are the final nail in its co The experiments with stylus con illogical and unresponsive; the characters, narrative trappings a pervasive Rare branding seem hideously clumsy and soulless; t racing is open, but lacking in ta technical reward. Rare's late-'90 obsession with currencies and unlockables, combined with the additions to adventure mode, m *Diddy Kong Racing* feel at times maze of conditions and transact search of an actual game, and p many of its attractive new featu behind bars with no word of ho free them.

That was Nintendo and Rare a byword for professionalism, n rather dogged definition of the of the road. Some pairings are b in the past.



The hub world may have been all the rag 1997, but after the open-world racing of *Drive Unlimited* and recent *Need For Spe* seems a bewilderingly empty encumbran



RATCHET & CLANK: SIZE MATTERS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£20)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SONY DEVELOPER: HIGH IMPACT GAMES

That title's nearly there – *Compression Matters* would be more fitting, however, for a game that has to step back on to a handheld while basing itself on a ballistic braniac of a PS2 franchise whose core philosophy has been to keep stepping things up. Control-wise, it's faced the perennial conversion problem – of deciding just how the PSP's layout gets custody of the analogue twins. It does moderately well with this, offering up some flexible options that are best employed with the stick for strafe movements and shoulder buttons for camera rotation. A limitation it may be, but it's one that *Size Matters* is aware of, offering a typically *Ratchet & Clank* adventure with a cutback on action compensated for by a fallback on to the series' peripheral platforming philosophy.

Stages are smaller and battles are often less intense, but *Size Matters* makes up for the shortfall in calibre with a visual imagination that, for the first time, makes a *Ratchet & Clank* game feel like an actual adventure instead of a sequence of shootout-corridors threaded along a necklace of planets. A diversity of settings – including a very welcome psychedelic dream sequence – and a variety of tasks help maintain an interesting pace, even if those tasks don't always do the same for the pulse rate. And



While the on-rails shooter sections starring Giant Clank are intense to the point of being somewhat unintelligible, there's a payoff – this is one of the most effusive lightshows to grace the handheld to date, becoming a hi-fidelity splatter-painting of bullets and explosions

there's the rub: subsequent PS2 *Ratchet & Clank* titles zeroed in ever more maniacally on gregarious gunplay for a reason; *Size Matters*, during its more anodyne minigame moments or plainer puzzles, can feel like it has let itself droop between two stools.

Little else has been lost in conversion, however. It has its frantic highlights, along with combat and backdrops that offer colour like few others, cutscenes whose humour hits just as much as it misses and a structure that offers plentiful reasons to revisit previous stages.

In short, High Impact Games has captured the very essence of Insomniac's past two games – *Ratchet: Gladiator* and *Resistance: Fall Of Man* – with an immense coding job whose design can't quite match such versatility and vitality. **[7]**



Hoverboard races are an expanded distraction, but can feel too oily to control well and the courses share *Jak X*'s excessive lap times. Such minigames will often offer new pieces of armour as a prize, enabling components of Ratchet's outfit to be swapped, mixed and matched



INFERNAL

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: METROPOLIS SOFTWARE



The composition of *Infernal*'s levels is such that first impressions are strong, but quick to diminish. Once you're up close to the various environments, bashing against locked doors, pointlessly physics-enabled furniture and invisible walls, the atmosphere is lost

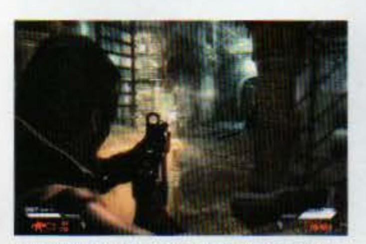
In screenshots, at least, *Infernal* bears more than a passing resemblance to *Resident Evil 4*. Unlike the diabolical port of that game that graced the PC last month, however, it also has the fidelity that the audience expects from its high-resolution displays. But while it knows which coordinates to feed its camera (back a bit, right a bit), and while mumbling anti-hero Ryan Lennox has the same hunched shuffle as Leon Kennedy, this mussed actioner knows little else about its apparent inspiration, its genre, or even itself.

Is it an adventure game or an arcade game? A console game or a computer game? There are so many designs at play that it seldom qualifies as any of them, and a nonsensical set-up hardly gets it off to the best of starts. Pitching the intelligence agencies of Heaven and Hell – Etherlight and Abyss – against one another, *Infernal* introduces Lennox as the loose cannon who's fallen out of favour with the men upstairs. Now a so-called Infernal Agent, the last remaining after a spate of unexplained assassinations that's rocked the underworld to its core, and he's on a mission to uphold the eternal balance between good and evil. Or something.

The Faustian pact has its perks, of course, and within the space of a few hours' play Lennox is supercharging weapons with his flaming arm, teleporting past security and divining elemental power-ups and hidden clues with his Infernal vision. But this rolling delivery of tricks – barely a second goes by without a tutorial pop-up introducing a new one – says much about the game's complete lack of substance. Having forged its exotic powers out of DirectX 9 special effects and Ageia physics, *Infernal* has no apparent clue what to do with them.

Elaborate-looking puzzles wind inexorably towards their lever-pulling, button-holding conclusions, crates block the path ahead in desperate bids to be blown up, and invisible walls funnel that path through ambushes and boss battles that hop occasionally from one long-lasting rut to another.

It's a clean game, at least, texturally crisp and evocatively lit, but the feeling of playing an interactive 3D Mark demo is discouragingly strong. **[3]**



Infernal's arsenal is as random as its ideas, with automatic rifles joining shurikens, laser pistols and, bizarrely, shoulder-borne welding torches

Williams
ROBOTRON:
2084







TIME EXTEND

ROBOTRON: 2084

FORMAT: **ARCADE**
PUBLISHER: **WILLIAMS ELECTRONICS**
DEVELOPER: **VID KIDZ (EUGENE JARVIS AND LARRY DEMAR)**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **1982**

Why do you love a game that refuses to love you back? Meet Robotron: 2084 – gaming's earliest abusive relationship

The history of gaming is a history of ingratiation. It's a trend that plays out on a number of fronts. Over three decades, consoles have wheedled their way into our lives and our living rooms, but the real change has taken place in the growing desire of games to win you over. Whether it's the worlds they take you to visit, the characters they introduce you to or, more recently, the regular showerings of Achievement points just for taking part, in a saturated market where most titles will slip past unnoticed, is it any surprise that games have such a pathological needy to be loved?

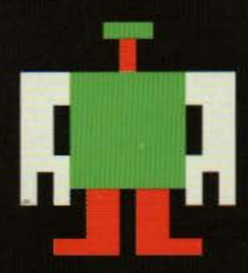
Furthermore, is it any surprise that ingratiation got confused with immersion somewhere along the line? While it's always nice to be fussed over, genuine involvement is what gamers really dream about. It's the promise that's kept people playing all the way from *Spacewar* to *Gears Of War*, through decades of bruised thumbs, incredulous relatives and joysticks lost to *Speedball 2*. Laggy servers, interminable cutscenes, *Kabuki Warriors* – they're consequences of the unending search for that special title that will pull you through the looking glass, making the rest of the world bleed away and focusing your attention on that single rectangle of light. Whether it's playing on a 36-inch plasma or a 12-inch black and white CRT, the right game can reach beyond hardware and draw you into its world – pushing you out hours later blinking, confused and late for work. That's immersion.

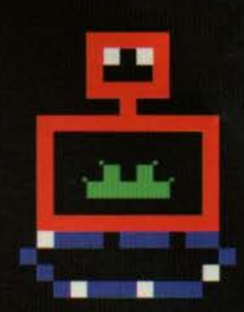
And that's also why *Robotron: 2084* remains so refreshing, a quarter of a century after its creation. Eugene Jarvis' follow-up to *Defender* is a game that consistently manages to involve players intimately without offering bribes. In fact, it doesn't seem to offer much at all: it is rudimentary, odd-looking and pedantically difficult – hardly a recipe for success. *Robotron* doesn't only succeed in its own right, it's still spawning imitators, from the Catherine-wheel light displays of *Geometry Wars* to the uterine aesthetics of *Mutant Storm* (which looks like *Robotron* redesigned by the top men at Rowntrees in collaboration with a committee of gynaecologists). Since its inception, Xbox Live Arcade is slowly filling up with twin-stick shooters, all taking their cue from *Robotron* itself. This begs the questions: how can something so fundamentally limiting weave such a powerful spell? And how can a game that clearly hates its players win so many of them over?

The right game can reach beyond hardware and draw you into its world – pushing you out hours later blinking, confused and late for work

Robotron's unforgiving design strikes too deeply to be explained away as a product of its time. All early arcade games had to temper their desire to ingratiate with the need to quickly move players on, but even the most hard-hearted of them showed you a little love when they could. *Space Invaders* may have swamped you with enemies, but it gave you shields to hide behind and at least a fair amount of time before the waves started crashing down on you. *Robotron* just isn't interested in that kind of thing. No shields, no smart bombs, no moment of reflection before the enemies attack. For those new to *Robotron*, their first game may last under 30 seconds. Death seems random, and the player's starting position in the middle of the screen, vastly outnumbered by enemies, is likely to induce not a sense of energised euphoria, but outright panic.

The story is equally bare, even by



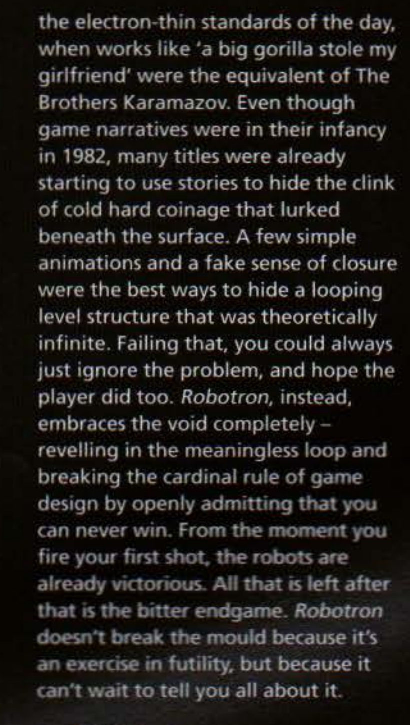






IT'S A TOASTER!

Those who feel that games can provide vivid snapshots of the cultures that created them will have no problem reading Cold War paranoia and the inevitability of Mutually Assured Destruction into the no-win scenario of *Robotron*. *Smash TV*, the unofficial sequel released in 1991, provides an even more interesting take on its own era: the late '80s. Although the gameplay may be largely unchanged and every bit as deadly, the fight for survival of the species has been replaced with a fight for toasters and high-end VCRs.



the electron-thin standards of the day, when works like 'a big gorilla stole my girlfriend' were the equivalent of The Brothers Karamazov. Even though game narratives were in their infancy in 1982, many titles were already starting to use stories to hide the clink of cold hard coinage that lurked beneath the surface. A few simple animations and a fake sense of closure were the best ways to hide a looping level structure that was theoretically infinite. Failing that, you could always just ignore the problem, and hope the player did too. *Robotron*, instead, embraces the void completely – revelling in the meaningless loop and breaking the cardinal rule of game design by openly admitting that you can never win. From the moment you fire your first shot, the robots are already victorious. All that is left after that is the bitter endgame. *Robotron* doesn't break the mould because it's an exercise in futility, but because it can't wait to tell you all about it.

And if it can't be kind, it refuses to be pretty instead. It's certainly not the graphics that will make you forget the world outside the television set. While the sprites have a primitive appeal and the sheer frisson of seeing that many enemies on screen at once



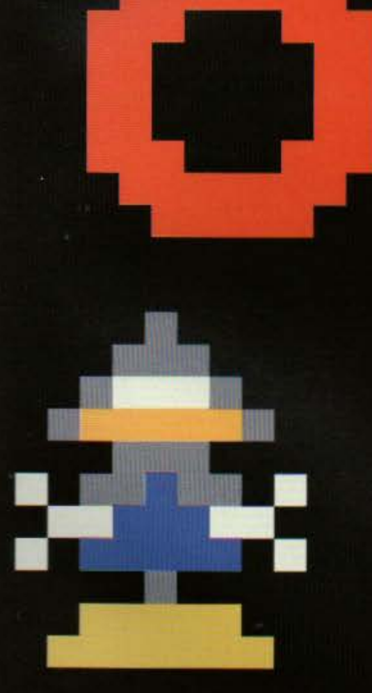
Grunts are the workers of the *Robotron* universe. Advancing slowly, their simple AI belies the fact that they often take out the complacent player

started a lineage that survives today in *Kameo* and *Dead Rising*, *Robotron*'s visuals are emphatically not for everyone. Managing to be both austere and cheaply garish at the same time, it's a look that few have tried to copy.

And yet it's by simplifying elements like gameplay, graphics and narrative – by seemingly breaking all the rules about how to welcome a player in and keep them hooked – that the game ultimately succeeds. *Robotron* understood – and at such an early stage – that videogames as a form were likely to be defined by their limitations, and that admitting those limitations and working within them is the key to success. So while it would be easy to say that the gameplay is basic because most games were basic 25 years ago, the real key to understanding its lasting appeal is when you realise that, even by 1982 standards, *Robotron* is far more simplistic than it really had to be.

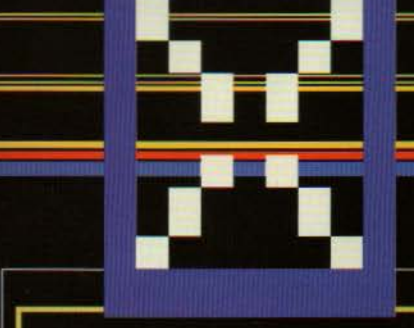
A comparison to *Defender* reveals just how simple it is. Gone are the previous game's baroque controls, gone are the landscapes, the starscapes, the transition from planet surface to empty space. *Robotron* just puts you in the middle of a blank screen and gives you, in the twin-stick control scheme, the perfect tools to move and shoot. And that's it. All that's left is to apply the pressure of numbers.

And with no other distractions, you're free to engage with the game's most compelling feature: the AI. Through the intermingling of a handful of enemy types with gently differing aims, *Robotron* creates a system of deadly intelligence through simple interactions. This is true emergence, the point at which individual routines come together to form something greater and unplanned. It's there in the way the Grunts, who are tasked with converging on the player, will inevitably bunch together, following you about in a tight bait-ball, or the way that the Spheroids will work their ways into the corners, or the way that – thanks to a glitch – all the Brains will search for Mikey before any of the other family members. The unexpected relationships between these varying behaviours can bring the player down, but they can also be exploited.



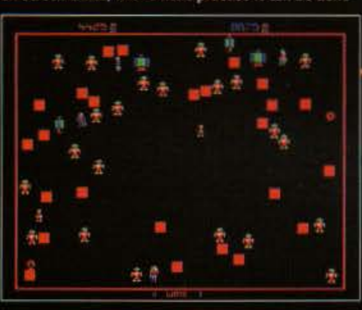


Crucial choices at the start of a level are whether to find family members before they're killed, or head for Spheroids before they create Enforcers





A glitch means the first wave of Brains is only after Mikey. If keeping him alive seems too much given the on-screen chaos, with a little practise it can be done



Looking at a full *Robotron* screen, the graphics may appear basic but it remains one of the classic videogame images. The balance of brutality and simplicity make it the definitive arcade experience

It's at this point the game reveals itself as realtime strategy as much as all-out shooter. The frantic multi-tasking, started in *Defender* but perfected here, means that tactics have to change on the fly – killing robots but collecting the members of your family creates a perfect balance of risk and reward that forces you back into danger again and again. More than anything, *Robotron*'s defining moment comes not while you're playing, but just after you've died. As a short game, most of your time will be spent in the post-mortem process, and it's here that the tiny game length starts to make sense: mistakes made, it's a matter of seconds until you're back where you were, able to try a different approach. Removing most of the legwork means that *Robotron* positively encourages experimentation – like *Tetris*, you spend as much time playing *Robotron* in your mind as you do in front of the TV. And, like *Tetris*, once it's inside your head it refuses to leave.

As a commercial device, its short game time and aggressive approach to competition couldn't have been any more finely tuned for taking your money

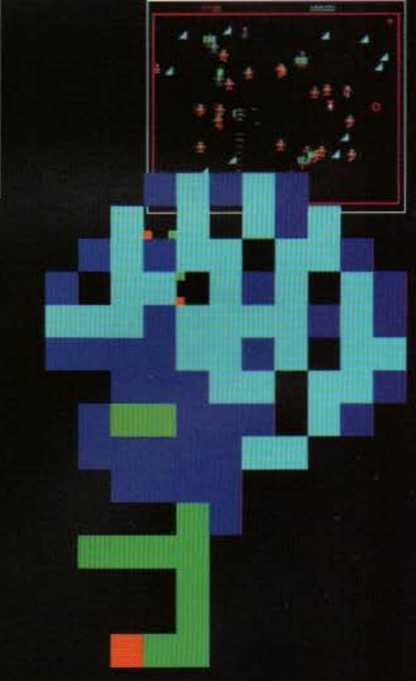
Quick, merciless and unadorned, *Robotron* is purity defined. By forever placing you in the middle of the battle, *Robotron* perfectly nailed the core appeal of the action game in one go: they simply don't get any more direct than this, and every iteration since feels like a dilution as much as an elaboration. As a commercial device, its short game time and aggressive approach to competition couldn't have been any more finely tuned for taking your money, and as a glittering, fizzing, eyesore its aesthetics couldn't be any more videogamey.

Perhaps that explains the diversity of its imitators. Although *Robotron* emerges fully realised, a game so whole and self-contained it seemed destined to be a development cul-de-sac forever, in truth, its purity has meant that it's anything but. Rather than a forgotten oddity, it lives on, along with other brutally basic titles like *Rogue*, as one of gaming's ancient engines – and its gears, still turning, are powering the least likely of descendants. For a game about the end of humanity, *Robotron*, when viewed in this way, has a surprising amount to say about lineage. You can trace a line of ancestry not just to high-sugar twitch novelties like *Geometry Wars* and *Assault Heroes* that locate its appeal purely in its twin-stick system, but also to games like *Halo*, with its variety of enemies, its emergent strategies and that magical, mythical 30 seconds of gameplay. Returning from such complexities to a study as simple as *Robotron: 2084* shows how small gaming's collective gene pool really is, and how largely unmapped it remains to this day.

XBOX LIVE arcade

BACK IN THE ARCADE

With original cabinets costing thousands of pounds and highly susceptible to damage as frustrated gamers ripped out joysticks or put their fist through the screen, the best way to play *Robotron: 2084* is currently via Xbox Live Arcade. The range of leaderboards makes for a compelling hook, and the Achievements are surprisingly varied, with points available for staying in one place or saving all family members alongside the regular grinds like surviving to Wave 30. The chances of finding a Live co-op partner capable of helping you to Wave 10 remain slim, however.







THE MAKING OF...
OPERATION FLASHPOINT: COLD WAR CRISIS

From hovercraft game to River Raid clone, Bohemia Interactive's cherished war sim didn't get real for a very long time

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS** DEVELOPER: **BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE STUDIOS** ORIGIN: **CZECH REPUBLIC** RELEASE DATE: **2001**

To understand *Operation Flashpoint* is to understand Prague, the city in which the game was developed. For brothers **Marek** and **Ondrej Spanel**, co-founders of Bohemia Interactive Studios, Prague's turbulent history was to provide inspiration for what is often considered the most realistic war game ever conceived.

"We spent our childhood and teenage years in a communist country behind the Iron Curtain," explains Marek Spanel. "Secretly we listened to Voice of America and were surrounded by soviet communist propaganda. In a country where Soviet troops invaded and stayed in 1968, a game about the Cold War turning hot was somehow close to us. But we were also influenced by many different people, games, books and movies. It all helped us to come up with a more believable setting and game background. We had a dream of an open-style game in a large and detailed outdoor environment."

Open gameworlds had been done before, but when *Flashpoint* was being developed the term 'emergent gameplay' was yet to be coined. Often thought of as unforgiving when first released in 2001, *Flashpoint*'s core strength – its liberating freedom linked to its believable setting and realistic troop behaviour – became a reference point and motivation to developers the world over.

But originally, and bizarrely, *Flashpoint* morphed out of something very different. "Our original plan was to create a simple arcade shooter, a 3D clone of the classic *River Raid*, named *Rio Grande*," Marek continues. "We soon realised this wasn't a really interesting project for us and moved towards a large open style of game. It took a few years to get to *Operation Flashpoint* from there. The background also changed significantly: we had a post-nuclear apocalyptic story where some remaining US and Soviet troops were fighting over the last place suitable for living on the Earth. After that we tried to switch to a background that was very real to us and set in the early days of Perestroika in 1985."

Though the Cold War had been tackled in games previously, *Flashpoint*'s central conceit of a rogue Russian general attacking NATO forces and overthrowing a group of islands hit a chord with gamers. At a time when the Kosovan war was still fresh in the mind and world governments were preparing to go to war with Iraq for a second time, the game's premise was both far enough in the past to avoid direct comparison, yet close enough to feel relevant. If anything,









the gripping story and alternative war zone was a breath of fresh air from the usual WWII and Vietnam clichés.

But it was *Flashpoint's* combination of fear and fairness that really marked it out from the crowd. While modern design handbooks tub-thump about pace, balance and smooth difficulty curves, *Flashpoint* unmercifully punished players for any kind of gung-ho attitude. Crawling on all fours in the grass wasn't an optional key command, it was a way of life. Failure to spot distant enemies on hillsides or in bushes could mean a short skip back to the mission select screen. One crack of a rifle was all it took.

Indeed, the one-shot kill from an unseen assailant initially felt like a joke, or worse, a bug. But *Flashpoint's* legacy was that its realism wasn't unfair or capricious. Yes, there was an element of chance, but with caution, good planning and combat experience the odds would always stack in the player's favour. "What you experienced in *Operation Flashpoint* was AI that was able to make tactical decisions on the squad level," explains Ondrej Spanel. "The higher levels were taken on by a story or mission designer. We strove to create AI that was not only challenging but also had limitations, like a human. Troops would be slow, and sometimes inaccurate, and we tried to compare how the AI behaves and reacts to players in the same situations making it as similar as possible. Initial impressions suggested that the AI was not as good compared to games that used a lot of scripting, however the AI is much less predictable. It was more enjoyable to those who spent a lot of time with it, or to those who liked to play the same mission several times."

When it came to harsh difficulty, *Flashpoint* was a drill sergeant not a nanny. "The one-save-per-level was a design decision and it really was an important part of the immersion factor of the game," picks up Marek Spanel. "As for those who thought it didn't make the game any fun, you might be surprised to hear we intended it as such. We are convinced that games can convey other emotions other than fun. Frustration seems to be a quite well-suited emotion for a war game."

While modern design handbooks tub-thump about pace, balance and smooth difficulty curves, Flashpoint punished players for any kind of gung-ho attitude

Flashpoint certainly didn't have much sympathy for those unwilling to try and try again. Mission goals were clearly stated but would never be achieved exactly the same way twice. Having the freedom to complete tasks in a variety of ways is now a common theme, but when *Flashpoint* was released it felt giddily empowering.



Flashpoint's attention to detail extended to the objectives screen which provided a compass, watch and some Ordinance Survey-style maps

The game's scale was profound given that so many complex interactions were happening simultaneously. "*Flashpoint* was absolutely unique for a firstperson shooter when we started working on it," recalls Ondrej Spanel. "It was in the days when the best FPS was *Duke Nukem 3D*. We had some experience in this field from our hovercraft game, *Gravon*, which was released on the Atari Falcon in 1995. We knew taking players out of limited corridors was something we really liked.

"The main difficulty was to maintain a reasonable level of detail at close range in those extremely large worlds," he continues. "This was something very different to common game architecture back then. Luckily, 3D acceleration arrived just in time and we managed to properly incorporate it. Indeed, 3DFX Voodoo was major technology that helped us where we wanted to be. Direct3D was also unsuitable for the tasks we required but luckily, with the introduction of DirectX 7 it was finally capable enough for the game."

The vehicles, which were so comprehensively and robustly incorporated into the gameworld, added immensely to the enjoyment and sense of scale. "Surprisingly, *Flashpoint* started as a game oriented only on vehicles," recalls Marek Spanel. "Actually, the real challenge was to incorporate characters into the game – it took a very long time to have reasonable-looking animations and to achieve the responsiveness of controls comparable to other firstperson shooters. I remember our characters were reacting like hovercraft before we tuned it to a level we were happy with!"

It's often the small details that count, and *Operation Flashpoint* had many fine touches to deepen the level of immersion: the context-sensitive radio chatter, the terrifying blackness of night missions, the ability to aim over the barrel of a gun, the precious medicine administered by a field medic and the soft panting of breath after an intense firefight all added to the sense of realism. The audio was equally exceptional for the time, with tanks and APCs rumbling threateningly over hillsides. Never had the rotating barrel of a T80 tank induced such fear and trembling.

Flashpoint's complexity, emergent AI behaviour and dizzying scale came at a price, however, with bugs and AI inconsistencies sometimes tarnishing the experience. But this is something Marek Spanel is happy to defend: "Of course *Flashpoint* wasn't perfect. Although it was very close to the original vision we had for it there's not

WE ARE THE MODS

From the very beginning, Bohemia worked directly with the mod community supplying in-house tools and knowledge to those with a passion for creating interesting new missions and *Flashpoint* worlds. One of the most novel is *LegaWarz*, a game quite openly based on LEGO characters and set against the backdrop of internecine rivalry between Legamen factions. The result is strangely believable, tragic and comedic. There are over 25 fully fledged mods and over 2,000 add-ons, including weaponry ranging from muskets to alien lasers. *Flashpoint* has also inspired the recreation of lesser-known armies, such as those belonging to Sweden, Finland and Pakistan, and their respective regalia and hardware.



Helicopters were frightening yet liberating, with over-excitement leading to many crashes. But, as with most of *Flashpoint*, determination led to mastery

much we would have done differently. Probably the main drawback was that some areas of the game logic or editing were a bit inconsistent as a result of the long-term evolutionary development. The mission design and overall campaign structure could have been better and the open-play style even more dynamic if we had known at the beginning all we had to learn during the development process."

The team responsible for *Flashpoint* only need look at the vibrant community that surrounds the game to get a sense of the love and enduring appeal it still commands. It is also one of those rare games that can throw up as many tall tales, hilarious mishaps and anecdotes as people who have played it. Indeed, *Flashpoint* stories are legend because when you single-handedly clear a village of Russian insurgents with only a hand grenade and an M60, it's something you need to boast about. Or, on the flip side, there are the valiant tragedies: crawling 8km through enemy territory, bloody and crippled, only to be shot dead within sight of an allied outpost wasn't an experience to be had elsewhere.

To play *Flashpoint* today is to experience the tension of war at a pitch and gritty toughness that few developers dare to approach. At a time when 'realism' in games is so hotly debated, this is a title that proves tough love, and even frustration, isn't always a bad thing.

A lack of music added to the believability and tension. Missions gradually ramped up the difficulty, while a superb editor enabled players to build more

FUTURE PERFECT

The recently released *Armed Assault* is the spiritual successor to *Operation Flashpoint*, and though it shares many of the original's design principles and goals, it's increased in scope considerably. Theoretically, *Armed Assault* can handle the movements and behaviours of 60,000 troops, compared to *Flashpoint*'s 3,000. Visuals have also been a big focus for the team due to early criticism that *Flashpoint* was ugly and ungainly even on its initial release back in 2001. Although shader-capable cards were around at the time, *Flashpoint* was barely able to use basic hardware transform and lighting.

By comparison, *Armed Assault*'s engine is based on shaders and has every recent feature available: normal maps, high dynamic range rendering, dynamic shadows, dynamic daytime cycle, shader animated grass, objects and humans, advanced lighting models with complex materials, the ability to handle huge satellite maps and a lot of shader intensive techniques used in areas like terrain rendering or foliage rendering. User interfaces and AI can now be created and customised and add-ons will benefit from the flexibility to use complex scripted animations.

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Stainless Games Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 1994

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 30

KEY STAFF:
Patrick Buckland, CEO; Matt Edmunds, COO; Shaun Smith, creative director; Ben Gunstone, production director; John Cook, business development



URL: www.stainlessgames.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Carmageddon 1 and *2*, *Crystal Quest*, *Novadrome*







Novadrome **is Stainless's XBLA battle racing game, while** ***Crystal Quest*** **is an update of the 1987 classic**





LOCATION:
Isle of Wight, UK

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Licensed arcade action game for 360 and PC, next-gen versions of Atari coin-op classics, cartoon franchise game for digital distribution, unannounced PSP project, *Crystal Quest* for Vista

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Best known in recent times as a leading developer of quality Xbox 360 Live Arcade products, Stainless Games is an established UK developer with a track record of delivering quality titles.

Stainless Games Ltd was formed by the co-founders of Stainless Software, the studio responsible for creating the original *Carmageddon* series of games. Around two years ago we took the decision to embrace Xbox Live Arcade, and we've been growing ever since. At present some ten Xbox 360 Live Arcade games are either released or in production bearing the Stainless name – and we are also busy creating titles for other platforms.

Stainless has always been strong in the fields of original IP generation and in taking a client's ideas and forming them into innovative commercial products. An example of the latter will soon be seen with the release of our Atari coin-op titles later this year.

Our mature and proven technology enables rapid development of games across multiple platforms and genres, which has proved ideal for the new wave of downloadable games such as Live Arcade and those for Sony's PS3.

Our team enjoys a relaxed and informal working atmosphere, and our south coast location means great weather and a good quality of life, at both work and play."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: Staffordshire University

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 12,000 full time students

URL: www.fcet.staffs.ac.uk

CONTACT: 01785 353370 or fcet@staffs.ac.uk



KEY STAFF

Dr Bobbie Fletcher: Awards scheme manager for BSc (Hons)/BEng (Hons)/ MEng in computer games technology







Staffordshire University has three campuses and has students from over 70 countries. The film centre was opened by the Queen in March 2006

STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY



LOCATION: Stafford

COURSES OFFERED:

MEng/BEng Hons computer games design
BSc Hons computer games design
BSc Hons computer games programming
MEng/BEng Hons computer games programming

INSIDE VIEW – SARAH JONES

"During an enjoyable first year on my BA computer games design course I studied 3D modelling using 3DS Max. We used lighting and texturing to produce realistic scenes as well as learning key concepts of level design, using the *Unreal* and *Half-Life 2* editors to produce a level based on the campus. We learned the principles and phases of good game design by critically analysing existing games of our choice.

"In the second year we modelled our heads using reference images, these were then animated to speak to us using phonemes and morph targets. We also modelled bodies and used motion capture to animate them. This gave me valuable artistic and technical skills as well as helping me to understand the relationships between different parts of the human body. Motion capture is now covered in the first year using Rare Ltd's motion capture suite. We created effects using the particle system within 3DS Max and animated characters with inverse kinematics and bipeds. We have also designed a game and produced a prototype of cutscenes and playable levels.

"In my third year I am currently learning Maya as well as undertaking a major individual project titled Narratology: Balancing Story and Gameplay.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed the course and intend to stay on to do an MSc, also in computer games design."



Codeshop
Tracking developments in development

This year's model

Powerful hardware combined with cutting-edge techniques has resulted in a new generation of artist-driven modelling tools

When it comes to game development, as with any other endeavour, necessity is often the mother of invention. It's particularly the case in the process of bringing highly complex technical advances into a state where they can be easily used by artists, programmers and designers.

One of the best examples in recent years has been the impact the adoption of normal maps has had in terms of encouraging a new generation of flexible, art-driven digital sculpting and surface-focused tools, such as Pixologic's ZBrush. But more significant perhaps is the ongoing ripple effect, which has seen the emergence of new companies offering even more exotic tools, such as modo, Mudbox and Silo. These, combined with studios rethinking their art pipelines thanks to the pressures on data complexity and management brought about by new machines such as PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, have resulted in a fluid atmosphere, both commercially and artistically.



Normal maps have almost become used as a shorthand term for technical power

First championed by PC-centric studios such as Crytek and Epic in the early 2000s, normal maps have almost become a marketing term used as a shorthand for technical power. There was some truth contained in that message back when only certain PC and Xbox games employed the

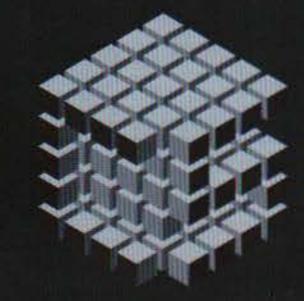
Product:	ZBrush v2.5
Company:	Pixologic
Price:	$489

ZBrush is a sculpting tool that, as well as modelling, also enables texturing and painting. It does this using a concept called Pixols, which extend the idea of the colour data contained in traditional pixels, with the addition of depth, material and lighting information. Another interesting facet of ZBrush is the way it mixes what are called 2.5D with 3D images; 2.5D images are 3D images that have been projected into the background of a ZBrush project. This allows very complex scenes, involving models of up to ten million polygons, to be worked on while making efficient use of processor and memory resources.
www.pixologic.com





ZBrush became popular within the games industry with the adoption of normal maps, but additional functions such as 3D painting and texture (above, right) mean it offers much wider capabilities. (Right) This demonstrates the progression of modelling a gingerbread man within ZBrush: starting with a mesh constructed using primitives through increasingly higher resolution models until the final model which has plenty of fine surface detail



technology, but now almost every game uses them.

Two problems needed to be overcome before this state of affairs could occur, however. The first was creating the very high resolution versions of low resolution in-game models from which normal maps are generated. Typically these consist of millions of polygons, which required artists to model using much more efficient and flexible techniques such as sub-divisional surfaces or sculpting tools.

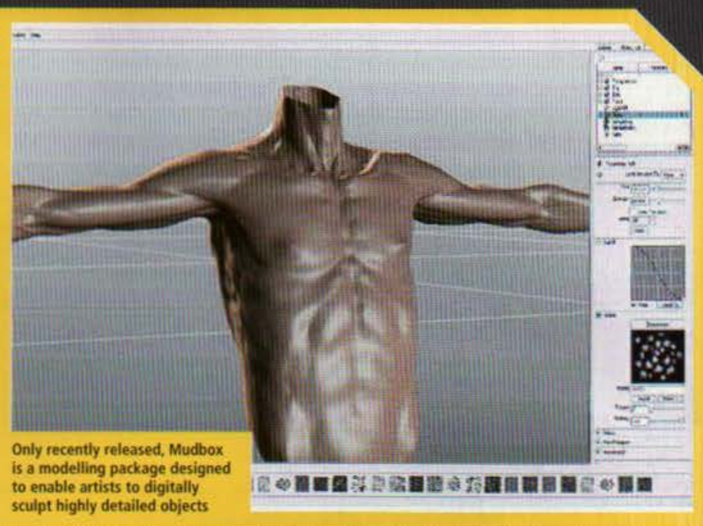
Once the high resolution model was created, the second issue was generating the normal map itself. So-called because it contains information on how a model's surface interacts with the lighting model, calculated by working out the normal (the way a model is facing) from points on the surface, the map thus incorporates the lighting detail of the high resolution model. This can then be applied to the low resolution, in-game model without requiring the prohibitive memory resources that using the source model would entail.

Some studios solved this calculation stage using their own smarts; Crytek created Polybump, while big tools companies such as Nvidia and Autodesk offered options within their existing products. Epic used the tools provided with Autodesk's 3ds Max for example. Equally, having been used for the first part of the normal map workflow, Pixologic created its own ZBrush plug-in, ZMapper, to enable artists to carry out their normal mapping process within a single package.

Of course, normal maps are only one technique in the developers' toolbox. Other currently popular coding buzzwords include displacement mapping and parallax mapping (aka virtual displacement mapping), while on the art side, new ways of creating and generating textures, such as ambient occlusion maps, are also being worked on. It seems like there's plenty more invention to come.

Product:	Mudbox v1
Company:	Skymatter
Price:	$649

Created by special effects directors from Weta Digital and game leads from EA, there's little surprise that Mudbox is one product many developers are keen to try out. Indeed, the likes of Naughty Dog and id Software are already using it. Like ZBrush, it offers high resolution, brush-based sculpting; something that's vital for the creation of the models required for normal mapping. One unique selling point is its use of 3D layers which, in a similar way to Photoshop, allow artists to model nondestructively and flexibly by using separate layers that can be easily tweaked and edited. Another neat feature is the way it enables artists to sculpt symmetrically on models that are posed in asymmetrical shapes. Mudbox is a pure modelling product though, without the texturing and painting options of ZBrush: finished models are designed to be passed through to other art packages such as Maya, 3ds Max or Deep Paint.
www.mudbox3d.com



Only recently released, Mudbox is a modelling package designed to enable artists to digitally sculpt highly detailed objects



Product:	Silo v2 (beta)
Company:	Nevercenter
Price:	$109

A 3D modelling package using polygons and subdivisional surfaces, Silo has been completely rewritten to take into account the new techniques being introduced into the game and film industries. One particularly significant addition is what Nevercenter calls displacement painting. Based on displacement mapping, it's a way of adding detail to models by slightly displacing points on a model's surface. This gives a better all-round visual look than normal maps but is more expensive in terms of processor and memory usage. Silo v2 enables artists to preserve their displacement mappings within their broader brush modelling. Another feature is Silo's automatic UV wrapping tools, which map flat 2D textures and maps onto the surfaces of associated 3D models.
www.nevercenter.com



One particularly nice feature of modo is its use of both polygons and subdivisional surfaces, which lets artists create smooth models

Product:	modo 202
Company:	Luxology
Price:	$895

The most fully featured of the next generation of 3D art packages is modo. Developed by a team which had previously worked on the LightWave product, modo is an integrated modelling, rendering and painting package. In terms of modelling, it uses both polygons and subdivisional surfaces, while its painting features use a layered approach, which together with a shader-based architecture allows you to incorporate techniques such as procedural textures and painting using bump maps. Rendering is less important for game developers, but can be useful for baking ambient lighting into textures and, of course, generating things like normal maps and occlusion maps. Modo is also easily integrated within existing art pipelines, alongside packages such as Photoshop, Maya and 3ds Max.
www.modo3d.com

YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

THANK CRUNCH IT'S FRIDAY

BY JEFF MINTER

It's a Friday, and outside I can see that it's snowing steadily. It's eerily quiet; the snow appears to have completely discouraged the occasional bit of traffic you can normally hear passing (which could be a problem later when I run out of cigs, and necessitate a trip on foot to the garage to fetch more, we'll see).

And my devkit is off, for the first time in weeks. It's been an interesting fortnight, and ultimately quite a rewarding one. It was decided that this was to be the week that we made our alpha submission of *Space Giraffe* to Microsoft. In a way that's a good thing – sometimes a bit of a deadline to work to can be a very productive thing, especially if you're working from home in an entirely freeform manner – and this is very definitely a necessary key point – the rule of XBLA is that at alpha, Microsoft basically have the right to give an overall 'go' or 'no go' to the whole project. Once past alpha you're started on the track through beta to release and publication – but you have to get past alpha first.

Cue crunch mode. Two weeks ago we had the basic mechanics of the game, a tutorial level, some of the Live Arcade framework not actually hooked up to the actual game yet, only a couple of enemy types, and no real levels at all.

Is there any other industry that has the equivalent of crunch mode? It seems to be something peculiar to the games biz, where coders will willingly commit themselves to spending every waking hour of every day in front of their compilers, forsaking food and any kind of disconnection from the job in hand to reach an appointed milestone. For the last week or so I haven't even touched another game (apart from brief, obligatory visits to my *Animal Crossing* village, of course) – even after working on *Space Giraffe* all day, the last thing that happens before heading for bed and tumbling unconscious is to hook up the devkit to the big plasma and play, play and play some more.

> "Is there any other industry that has the equivalent of crunch mode? It seems to be something peculiar to the games biz"

This part of the job hasn't been so much about coding – although there is always coding to be done, new enemies need procedural generation of their geometry, and new behaviours need to be defined and tied in to the rest of the gameplay – as it has been about designing levels and then sitting and playing them again and again and again, scrawling notes as you go along about things that are wrong and things that are unsatisfying and things that need changing, then stopping to fix those things, then doing it again and again and again... I am reminded of that old line about there being a statue in every piece of stone, and all the artist does is remove the bits that aren't in the sculpture.

It's all about refining, and balancing, and making very careful additions and occasionally subtractions as well – I had a whole thing in the gameplay that had seemed a reasonably good idea when I implemented it, but which when it came down to creating actual levels didn't feel quite as good as I thought it should. I ended up completely changing how it worked, making it simpler and more intuitive, and it turned out a hell of a lot better. It's a good example of why game designs should never be graven in stone before coding begins, and then just coded to spec. Design needs to adapt to suit the character of the emerging gameplay. In the end there's just no substitute for sitting there with a joypad in your hands and playing actual levels to know what works and what doesn't, which are the right paths to follow and which are the wrong trees up which to be barking.

After two weeks of crunch, instead of a loose collection of bits and intentions, we have what looks and plays like an actual game. Real levels – 32 of them – are in, the gameplay is nicely balanced, we can watch the leaderboards and see the scores of alpha testers over the world coming in as they play; it doesn't fall over, the menus and other such interstitial bits and pieces look good, and the game has a strong, distinctive character that I am really happy with.

Yesterday was the icing on the cake really. We develop in 'debug mode' which generates code that contains useful stuff for debugging but which is a fair bit slower than 'release mode' code. I'd balanced the game so that it was perfectly acceptable in that mode – 60fps a lot of the time, maybe going to 45-odd when a lot of stuff was happening, only ever touching 30 on really mad, hectic levels or during major weapon detonations and transitions.

Yesterday we tried the release mode compile, just to see if we'd get much of a speed increment out of it. The whole thing runs at a flat 60fps no matter what. It looks beautiful, the gameplay is intense and no matter how much crazy stuff is kicking off on any level, it's just pure silk to play. It's just joy on a stick, pure candy.

So we've come a long way in those two weeks of crunch, and I am extremely happy with the results, and I am certain now that *Space Giraffe* is going to be something very special indeed. All I need to do now is finish off the levels and add the bonus round and we should be good for beta, pending MS approval of alpha, of course.

But I can't see that being a problem at all.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser



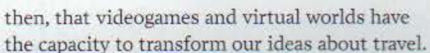
THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

GREEN GAMES

BY TIM GUEST

Ever since Charles Reich's early '70s seminal text on environmental damage, The Greening of America, consciousness of mankind's effect on the natural world through pollution and waste has grown to a global phenomenon. The world is warming, the Maldives are shrinking, and we all know something has to be done. We can cut down on air travel, but what else? Now, there's a new possibility: we can play videogames.

In most European languages, the words for time, work and distance all share common roots. In videogames and virtual worlds, the software engine also transports us. (Young men still tinker with engines, but of a different kind: the car in the driveway has been replaced by the PC in the bedroom.) MIT professor Henry Jenkins has called videogames 'a new kind of narrative architecture', and space and motion seem crucial to our experience of gaming. It is no surprise, then, that videogames and virtual worlds have the capacity to transform our ideas about travel.



Buying a car from a vending machine was a laugh, but I've never seen anyone drive the cars

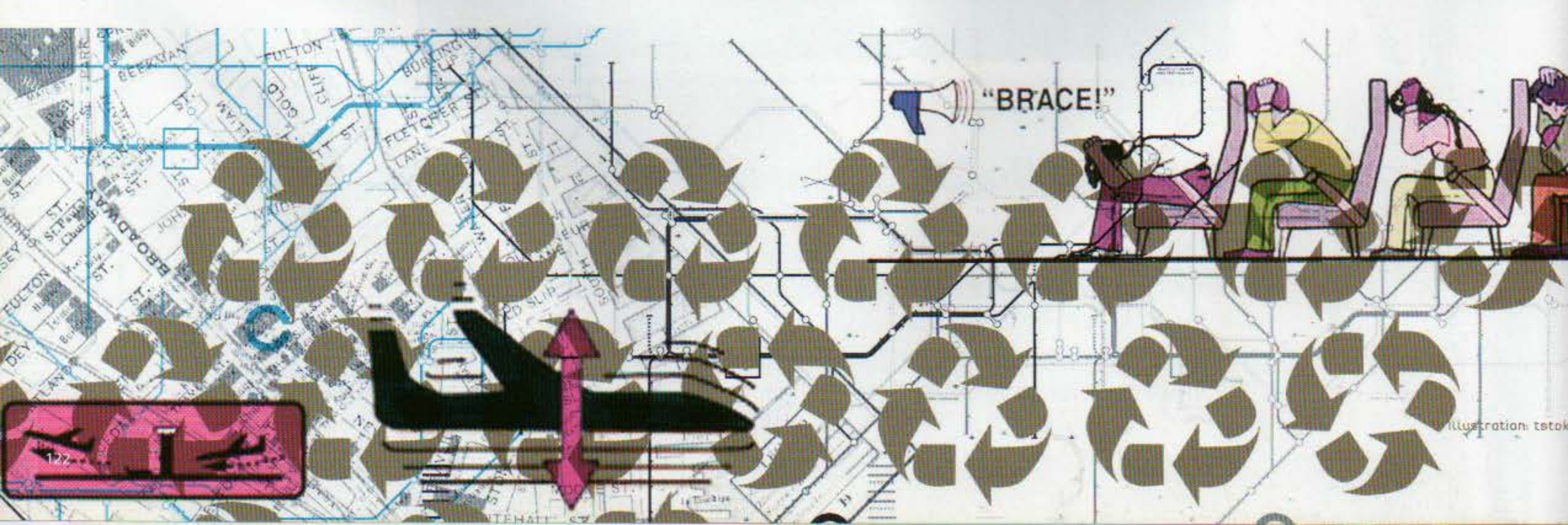
As **Philip Rosedale**, the original visionary behind *Second Life*, explained to me, the first thing people do when they enter his virtual world is buy vehicles: airplanes, parachutes, spaceships, jetpacks, UFOs. But then they leave the vehicles behind and grow wings. In most online worlds you can travel without moving: even in *World Of WarCraft*, a wizard can send you home. Traditional modes of transport, with the exception of horses, are redundant. But that doesn't mean our real-world car manufacturers haven't tried to claim a space in the virtual world. Toyota was the first car manufacturer to make a real-world model (its people carrier the Scion B) inside *Second Life*. (It had been planned to give the car away but, afraid to alienate existing virtual car dealerships, Toyota charged the equivalent of $2 per Scion). In September, Audi premiered a new TV spot inside *Second Life*, and in October General Motors bought 16 *Second Life* islands – 256 acres – to help extend its brands into cyberspace. A month later, Nissan built a four-car-high virtual car store, modelled on a soft-drink vending machine. Buying a car from a vending machine was a laugh, but I've never seen anyone drive the cars.

What happens to a world where cars are no longer required? And can that ease of travel re-infect the real world also? Recently, I caught up with Rosedale, to see how he felt about the runaway success of his world. Rosedale told me he felt technology like *Second Life* would soon replace much real-world travel. "All our creative and intellectual energy will be directed there," he told me, of virtual worlds. "There's no question that it's going to happen, by the way, to our jobs. Very rapidly. Given that urban centres like London and New York are based on a confluence of people, directed toward doing specific types of work like finance. What's interesting will be how many people choose to live in New York or London when they no longer have to." I asked Rosedale to indulge his futurist tendencies: "The futurist in me says that the real world will become like a museum, very soon. It doesn't mean that we won't go to places like New York, it's just that they will be like amusement parks, where we have carefully preserved memories of what they were before. So that it will be fantastically cool to go to see New York, but in the same way that it's cool to go to see the Mayan ruins now. Because the big buildings will still be there, and they'll be kind of covered in dust, because no one bothers too much with them any more."

James Lovelock, the environmental biologist who coined the term 'Gaia' for the Earth's living ecosphere, has suggested this capacity to travel without leaving your chair might be part of the solution to climate change. In his book, The Revenge of Gaia, Lovelock sets out his vision of virtual worlds as an integral part of a more sustainable future, an unconscious migration to low-energy activities. The figures are inarguable. When I travelled to San Francisco to visit Rosedale, my flight produced nearly a million grammes of carbon pollution for my seat alone – equivalent to running a car for two and half years. When I travelled to meet him in *Second Life*, I produced almost none – about as much as leaving my fridge open for five minutes. A thousand square-foot retail outlet in the real world uses around 280 kilowatt hours of electricity each week; the server technology behind an island-sized virtual outlet, set over 512 acres, uses the same energy in a year. If we do end up in a future where oil is scarce we may have discovered a different, more efficient means to conquer distance: to project our selves, but leave our bodies behind.

Seen in this light, videogames, and their descendants the virtual worlds, have the capacity to help solve at least as many problems – commuting, overcrowded urban centres, pollution – as they contribute to. So, while we were saving the world from Combine soldiers, or from the Covenant, or even just saving Lemmings, we may have been helping to save the world from ourselves, too.

Tim Guest's book about virtual worlds, Second Lives, will be published by Hutchinson in April. Visit him at timguest.net



BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

THINGS CAN'T GET ANY BETTER, CAN THEY?

BY MR BIFFO

Back when I used to write an occasionally games-related thing called Digitiser, we would regularly receive letters accusing us of bias toward one console or another. Every single day we'd be accused of hating one console or other in favour of all the other systems. I never quite understood why, because we were equally unpleasant about each of the main formats, and equally pleasant at times too.

Usually, every console has at least something going for it (for the purposes of this argument we shall forget the CD-32, the Jaguar, et al), and plenty of reasons to hate it as well.

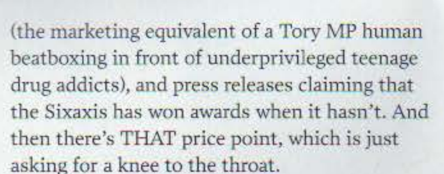
I'm well aware that, of late, I've had quite a bee in my buzzer about the PlayStation 3. In several of these columns I've been disparaging about Sony's console. Frankly, Sony hasn't helped its cause, what with the hilarious: 'Oh! But we thought of it before them!' motion-sensitive controller, the hilarious fake fan-blogs (the marketing equivalent of a Tory MP human beatboxing in front of underprivileged teenage drug addicts), and press releases claiming that the Sixaxis has won awards when it hasn't. And then there's THAT price point, which is just asking for a knee to the throat.

However, any anti-PlayStation 3 'bias' is through reason and circumstance rather than any sort of irrational format bias. If you really thought about it, you'd come to the same conclusions as myself. Unless you're an idiot.

The truth is (even putting Sony's recent, jaw-dropping PR incompetence aside) the PS3 has simply arrived 18 months too late. The stark bottom line is that I just don't see it offering me anything I can't get elsewhere. There's an important note of distinction between the Xbox 360 and the PS3, and that note is as follows: there really isn't that much of a distinction between the two of them. The 360 may be a year older than the PS3, but its software is already a generation ahead. The games look and play pretty much the same on both machines.

We're at a point now where games hardware is so powerful it's like the difference between travelling at 450,000 mph and 490,000 mph; when your hair is being blown back into its follicles are those 40,000 mph going to matter?

I've most likely mentioned before that – like those Victorian saps who thought their lungs would explode if they travelled faster than 30mph – I really thought graphics had peaked with the 3DO. Actually, to be fair to myself, what I actually asked at the time was whether graphics needed to get any better. I can vividly recall playing the 3DO version of *Road Rash*, and pondering whether graphics had reached a point where incremental improvements in visuals had stopped contributing to the gameplay.



> New graphics technologies can provide new types of gameplay, as well as more efficient rendering of female characters' breasts

I may have been a generation or so too early in my ponderings, but I once again think that it has been a long time since graphics technology has genuinely enhanced gameplay. I'm not talking about whether games – as a whole – are improved by better graphics, but whether new graphics technologies can also provide new types of gameplay, as well as more efficient rendering of female games characters' breasts.

The most obvious example would be that leap from 2D to 3D. From *Super Contra* to *Wolfenstein*, or from *Mario World* to *Mario 64*, or *Sonic The Hedgehog* to *Tomb Raider*.

You can have better, smoother 3D, with multiple light sources and bump mapping, and you might be able to throw more characters on screen, but I really do think this is it: we have reached the tipping point where graphics can no longer contribute new ideas to games.

It's probably a lot of the reason why Nintendo is now less concerned with the look of its software, and the power inside its consoles, and started thinking in more spatial, real-world terms, about what games can achieve.

I mean, what are the innovations of the PS3? 'True' high-definition visuals? Whoooh! I can barely contain my glee. A Blu-ray player? Yes, because I'm desperate to own a copy of Terminator 3 that looks slightly sharper than the one I already own. A motion-sensitive controller? The classic PlayStation controller was never conceived with motion sensitivity in mind, and if anyone thinks we're going to get motion-sensitive PS3 games which feature the same levels of interactivity and innovation as *Wii Sports* or *WarioWare Touched*, then they're the most blinkered zealot in history.

The PlayStation boasts a healthy launch line-up, and it'll play games just fine, but there's no escaping the fact that the games on the PlayStation 3 are either already available on the Xbox 360, or have equivalents which are. Frankly, there is no reason for the PS3 to exist. It's a redundant console. You've got the Wii for your Nintendo exclusives, and your fix of innovation, and the 360 for everything else.

I realise I'm going to have to shut up about the PlayStation soon, for fear of becoming a stuck record. I've actually got nothing against Sony, but a market-leading hardware company hasn't ballsed things up like this since Sega and the 32X. It's human nature to laugh and point when we witness a car crash. Or is that just me?

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox



Issue 173



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Digital actors

Can digital actors ever completely replace human actors? Can computer programs ever be complex and sophisticated enough to realistically convey human emotions and facial expressions?

Contra Rose

There is a part of the human brain that has the ability to recognise human traits and behaviour. If you look at 'Advent Children' as an example of excellent representation of the human form but there is something not quite right with the whole 'human' package. Your mind realises that while they may look human, they are not human.

Revelthedog

Yes - is the obvious answer, because who knows what the future holds in terms of AI, animation and graphics etc... When will this happen is a better question.

Impactor 2.0

I am a teacher. I am 27 years old. I teach pupils between the ages of 14 and 18. Ever since the release of the Wii I have been receiving a torrent of arguments from stick-thin pubescent males that follow roughly the same lines of logic – the Wii has crap graphics; the Xbox 360 is the market leader.

Now, I like my job, in fact I love my job, and because of this I do not wish to lose it because I shouted at and verbally abused a child because of their affiliation for a particular console. I have therefore decided that I will rant through your hallowed pages (assuming this email is printed) to all teenagers out there who think in a similar way to my students. Here goes:

Nintendo has sold 40 per cent of Microsoft's 10 million installed base in approximately 16 per cent of the time.

The Wii and the 360 are *not* in the same market. The Wii is a games console and the 360 is a DVD player, games console, PC, washing machine and can opener. Its definition is so broad that frankly it could be anything. This is exactly why it hasn't sold to the age group that are buying into the Wii (and the DS). They aren't quite sure what it is.

Most games that are on the 360 are in fact the same game. Think about it – *Gears Of War*, *Halo 3*, *Lost Planet*, *Rainbow Six*, *Ghost Recon*... there's very little variation between them in terms of gameplay. This is exactly why the 360 is a catastrophic failure in Japan (the world's second-largest videogames market) and why anyone over the age of 40 really isn't interested in buying one. Furthermore, this is not the best way to position a product considering the fact that most western markets have an aging population.

Most shocking is the complete lack of gadgets on the 360 as standard. You have to buy a wireless adaptor and a HD-DVD drive separately, both of which you get as standard with a PS3. If you buy a 360, plus the wireless adaptor, plus the HD-DVD drive the price will exceed £425. The 360 is simply *not* good value for money. If you buy it purely as a games machine it's completely useless because there's only one game on it, and if you want a multimedia device then you have to spend more than you would to buy a PS3. Either way is economic lunacy.

"The Wii and the 360 are not in the same market. The Wii is a games console and the 360 is a DVD player, games console, PC, washing machine and can opener"

I could go on, so I shall...

Microsoft have moved too soon. They may have a substantial lead, but this does not mean that the 360 will maintain that lead. The culture of gaming has evolved since January 2006 and people will want a console that has everything included (the PS3) or a console that offers unique gaming experiences at a very low price (the Wii). The 360 offers neither of these qualities.

Finally, the argument that the graphics are better on the 360 simply brings me out in hives every time I hear it. Saying a game is better because of its graphics is like saying celery is better than a Mars bar because it has fewer calories. **Edge** gave *Resistance: Fall Of Man* 7/10 and *Wario Ware: Smooth Moves* 8/10. The latter is an 'excellent' game and the former simply a 'good' game. Surely the PS3 title's graphics should have been its trump card?

Thank you for taking the time to read this rant, I just had to get it off my chest.

Alex Westworth

Always glad to do our bit to reduce violence in the classroom.



Win a DS Lite for the best letter

Having been a manager of a Game store for seven years, I left the company, and now find myself watching the industry from the other side of the counter. I was never a fan of the way our company sold pre-owned software over new, and in recent months, I am noticing the presence of used games in-store is starting to outweigh the new stock on display.

I can't think of a single industry where pre-owned is so dominant (you don't get second-hand books in Waterstones for example, or used CDs in HMV), and yet a second-hand game is often quite similarly priced to new. In the car industry for example, a customer purchasing a used car is likely to be unable to afford a new one. In a games store, I regularly see games priced at just £5 less than a new one. The margins on pre-owned are higher, and staff are told to offer a pre-owned copy over a new one whenever possible.



The target for pre-owned was 20 per cent of the store's turnover when I left the company. And yet, every pre-owned sale is one less sale for the people who made the game in the first place.

The only profit being made in the sale of a pre-owned game goes to the shop and it's the developers and publishers (as well as everyone else involved in the creation of the product) that loses out. I feel that pre-owned software as a main focal point of revenue for the major chain stores is a bigger threat to the industry than piracy. From a developer point of view, buying a second-hand game brings in as much revenue as pirating a copy from the internet. The pirate was probably not going to pay for the game in the first place, while the honest customer was going to buy a new game and decided on pre-owned instead. In fact, I'm sure a developer would be happier for someone to steal a copy of their game from the shop than buy a brand new, would Rage, the developers of *Rocky*, still be with us? *Rocky* wasn't a bad game at all, and did very good business for our store, but it was the same two or three copies being sold over and over.


A mouse and keyboard might be best for the likes of *Serious Sam*, muses Tom Westmacott, but does the PC need a standard controller?

I feel that the traditional bricks-and-mortar retailer is making a rod for its own back with pre-owned. Why would a publisher want to risk a customer walking into Game or Gamestation, and coming out with a second-hand one – the shop would have to order more stock then!

"I used a security pen to make a secret mark on a copy of Rocky, so I could identify it if I saw it again. The same disc was traded in and re-sold six times"

I once used a security pen to make a secret mark on a copy of *Rocky*, so I could identify it if I saw it again. *Rocky* was a good game, but a short one with little replay value. The same disc was traded in and re-sold six times that I know of. I assume this is why the shops say 'pre-owned', not 'second-hand', because a used game can be tenth-hand and still command the same price as a second-hand copy.

And this leads me to my main argument – if all games were sold pre-owned game instead of a new one? The dominance of pre-owned in the two major chains, as well as all the independent stores, is surely a huge incentive for publishers to move to alternative distribution (like Xbox Live) or to give preferential pricing to those companies who only sell new.


Is *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* really the same game as *Halo, Lost Planet, Rainbow Six* and *Gears Of War*, as Alex Westworth claims?

Pre-owned is getting more dominant all the time, and is sapping money away from the industry that is needed to fund future development. And with broadband and other direct distribution becoming more and more popular, we know that while the shops need the developers and publishers, the publishers no longer need the shops.

Does **Edge** have any thoughts on this issue?
Stephen Piers

What's clear is that the status quo won't last much longer: direct distribution, expansion packs and download content have already changed expectations of what buying a game should mean, and what it should cost.


F

Topic: My thoughts on FFXII and the 'modern RPG'

I'm not enjoying the game at all. I think it's dull. Weak characterisation, a frustrating and unrewarding battle system, a limp story concentrating so much on the broad, political nature of what's going on that it fails to give proper attention to the characters and soul of the story.

I'm wandering around, with the disjointed gameplay and tedious objectives gnawing at my mind, and it's clear just how much the game is trying to be a 'next-gen RPG - melding action and complex RPG elements. The end result is something that just isn't fun. By dangling the 'action' carrot in front of me, all it achieves is subconsciously making the player yearn for a true action title, with satisfying, skill-based combat. It's a watery, pathetic hybrid, ungratifying the same way *Vagrant Story* was.

If I want an exciting 3D adventure, I'll play *Ninja Gaiden*. If I want to play an engrossing RPG with soul, I'll play *Final Fantasy VII*.

Consider *Ninja Gaiden*. You 'level up' with persistence, just as you do in *FFXII*. But in the former it's based on reactions, learning enemy weaknesses, practice, dexterity, pure skill. In the latter, much of this is lost. How can selecting from a menu ever be as gratifying as skilfully executing the moves yourself, seeing the enemy flail/dodge, before planning the next onslaught. Would you enjoy *Street Fighter 2* if it used *FFXII*'s system? I doubt it.

***FFVII* is a true turn-based RPG though. It makes no pretension of being an action game. It has soul, a story that works, and a separate RPG turn-based system which works. *FFXII* is trying to be an action game with deep RPG elements and a fine story. It fails on every account.**

It used to be black and white. RPGs were distinct from action games. Technology and knowledge simply made it that way. Action elements have slowly been introduced more and more into RPGs of late, and in my opinion it's simply highlighted how stale and doomed the genre is.
Goat

Your **E172** cover was nicely done, but one thing was missing – the 'console' has no controller. Of course, including a keyboard and mouse would give the game away, but surely this is the greatest constraint on the PC gaming market, more than the wide variation of hardware. The keyboard is pretty hopeless for gaming, with its long-travel buttons. The mouse is great for fast, precise aiming and also for GUI input, but as it lacks self-centring it is unsuitable for manipulating anything of any weight (car, plane) that should not respond instantly to user input.

Thus the PC is top dog for the FPS (instant aiming) and strategy (GUI), but weak in other genres. While some PC games are made for 'PC with joystick' or 'PC with wheel', these developers thus lose the PC's huge 'installed base' advantage, relegating their games to a niche market. Console developers know that every potential customer has a standard controller, and can take full advantage of it. The greatest lesson of the Wii is that the standard controller is a key part of a gaming 'platform', just as much as the silicon internals are.

If Microsoft really want to make the PC an equal contender alongside the 360, they should define a 'gaming PC' standard that includes a minimum standard controller in the box – four face buttons, four analogue axes. And if I were a PC developer, I would encourage my customers to hook up a console controller, including standard input mappings for all the common types. The output methods (graphics, sound) are present and correct on the PC, all we need to fix now is the input.
Tom Westmacott

A quick flip of E172 will reveal a mouse tucked away on the back cover. And wouldn't Microsoft argue that compared to the omnipresence of the mouse and keyboard, the Wii – with its combination of classic controller, the Remote and the Nunchuck – has anything but a standard input system?

I think I can safely say that we were all a little baffled by the comments made by Dan Brown in last month's issue [E173]. It amazes me that some people still have the arrogance to treat videogames as though they are

Continued



something mysterious that needs to be dissected like a newly discovered animal. People like Dan Brown – people who know next to nothing about videogames – should wake up to the fact that they are a form of entertainment. It's that simple. They are fun to play, which is why lots of people go out and buy them. It really angers me that someone can fail to see what makes games so rewarding. No amount of bizarre wonderings will ever allow Mr Brown the ability to enjoy games. I pity him for that, and I also feel that the questions he asked are far too basic to answer, but answer them I will, if only for the hell of it.

To me, a gamer is someone who plays and loves games – just as film buffs are known as such because they like to watch films. You don't need qualifications to become a gamer. You don't need to speak a different language. You don't need anything other then the desire to play games. And it is this desire that makes us better than those ignorant game-slating fools who are looking increasingly old-fashioned (the name Boris Johnson comes to mind).

The desire to play games means that we will cart an Xbox to a friend's home just so that we can show him *Halo 2* co-op, and it means that we will camp out outside HMV for days for the chance to catch a glimpse of a PS3. We gamers are no different from all the other groups who think that books/movies/plays are the greatest thing that the world of arts and entertainment can offer us. Nothing separates us from all the other members of society. And it doesn't matter if our gaming interests are as simple as a passing interest in the Wii or a fully fledged commitment to *World Of WarCraft* (and after the comments he made last month, god help Dan Brown if he ever expresses an interest in becoming a dark elf).

Gaming is something to cherish, not something to analyse. And, before I finish, allow me to make an observation. Boris Johnson pretends to think that videogames are a scourge on our society. They are draining away our children and turning them into violent zombies. But I wonder what other alternative he would recommend to Britain's teenagers? Playing football in the rain? Dealing drugs, perhaps? Videogames are the best thing to happen to us in a long time. And people who realise that are most definitely gamers.
Mike Skellington

Johnson's arguments hold some water (is excessive, exclusive gaming really healthy for a child?), but your letter holds a DS-winning sentiment.



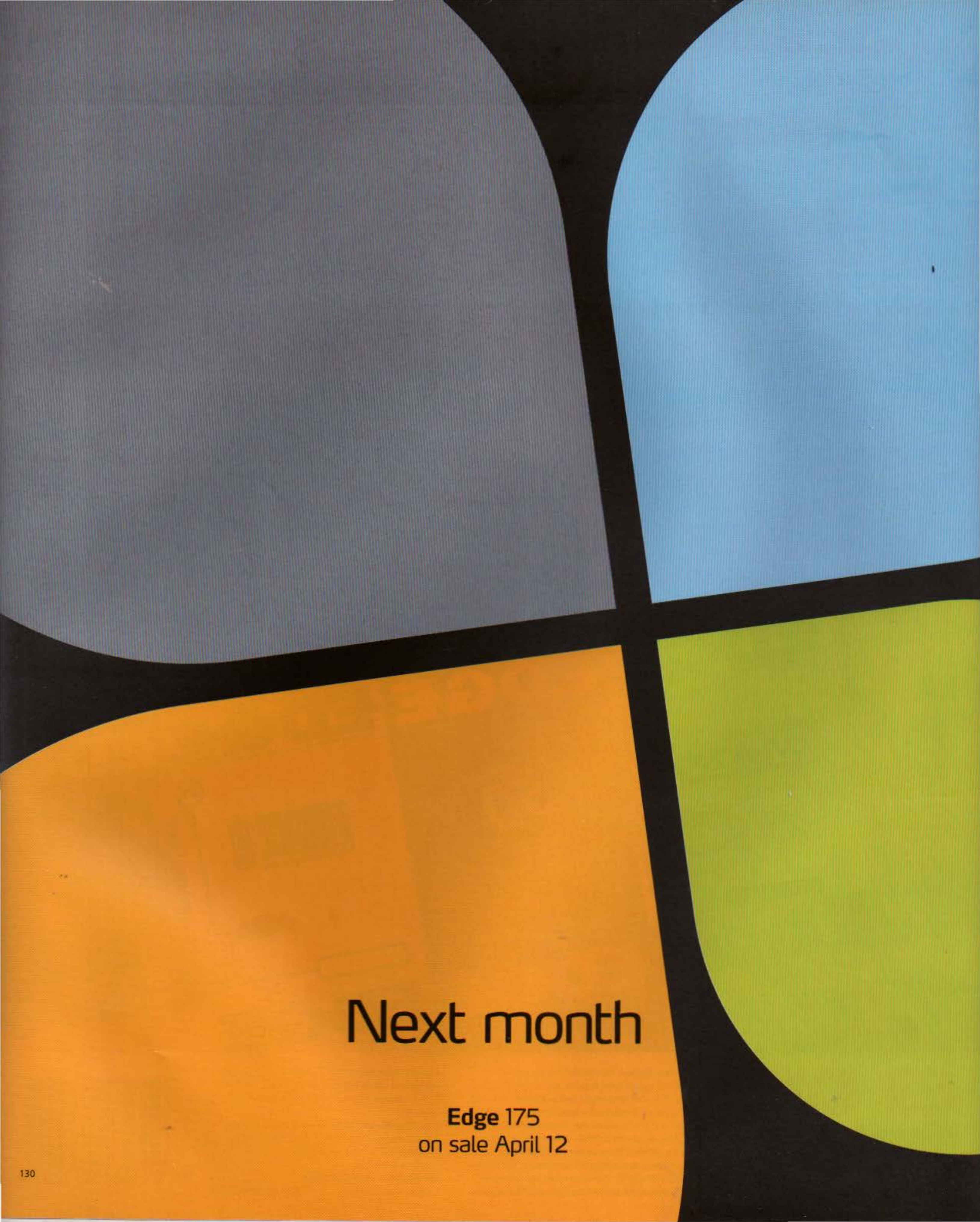
Topic: Robert Koch
Many books or films will teach you things without being actively educational. This does not seem the case in games, but why not? We could have a *Resident Evil*-type game with action sequences and so on, but at the same time you go into the process of discovering what the pathogen is.
mr_shoe_uk

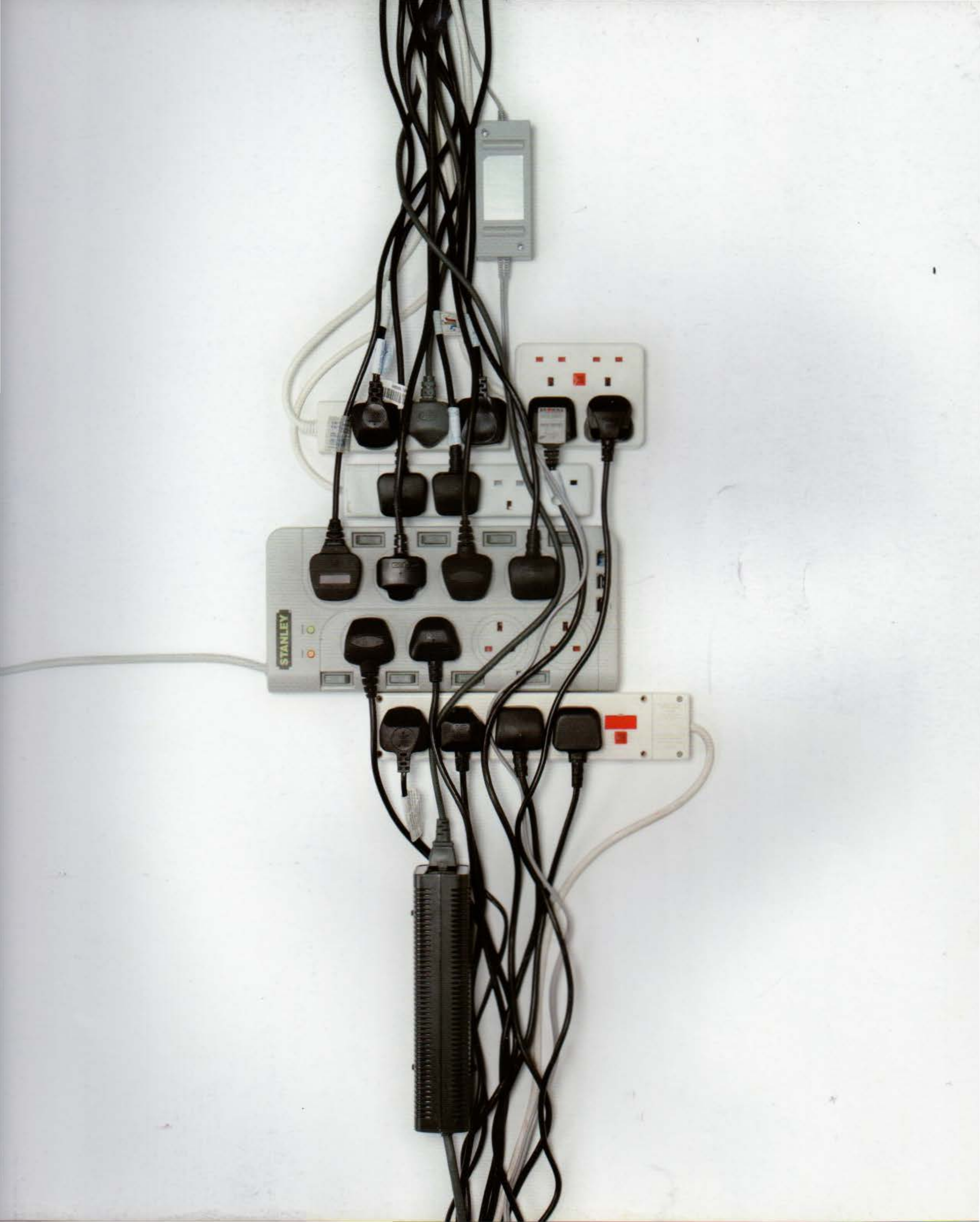
It would be very interesting to see if a game could teach economics, both macro and micro, and in a way that could be applied on a personal level (barring issues of location, that is). Perhaps that is the biggest problem – far more than films or books, games are made with a 'global' audience in mind, and knowledge is subject to local interpretation. Perhaps that's why there's relatively little actual factual knowledge in games.
MrMonkey

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